

Revolutionary Perspectives 51

Global Capitalism is Turning the Screw



We Have No Choice But to Fight

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From Episodic Resistance to Global Class War?

We are dedicating the bulk of this issue of RP to “green shoots”. No, not of the mythical, much spotted capitalist recovery, but of the revival of working class resistance around the planet, much of which is going unreported.

Chinese Steel Strikes

Whilst the capitalist press is full of stories and pictures about ethnic or environmental conflict in China (see <http://www.ibrp.org/en/articles/2009-07-20/inter-ethnic-conflict-in-xinjiang-a-proletarian-tragedy>) they tell us less about workers’ struggles. There have been literally thousands of strikes and protests in China over the last year where at least 20 million have recently lost their jobs. In the last few weeks workers in the old state run industries have not only launched a series of strikes but have even killed a manager who tried to enforce wage cuts. This came about because the Chinese Communist Party is trying to privatise them. In Henan 3000 steelworkers at the Linzhou Steel Corporation launched a strike which led to a fortnight of violent clashes with police at the factory gates. The workers were supported by thousands of others from the locality. This solidarity was critical in forcing the state to withdraw the privatisation plan but we all know they will be back when conditions allow. This strike followed another at Tonghua Iron and Steel where the factory had already been sold to private industry. This not only led to the usual wage cuts (which were reduced to 1090 yuan or about £160 a year) but workers had remained unpaid for months. The murder of a particularly arrogant boss is only one indicator of the growing class tension and no doubt contributed to the suspension of the privatisation programme at Linzhou.

...the Chinese regime is worried by the social ferment throughout the country. The crisis is creating ever more bitter social tensions and some officials are beginning to fear that they could explode and are beginning to demand compensation and union policies to keep the workers quiet. Last year, after years of growth, China suffered a fall in employment and a strong economic crisis. In January alone there was a 21% fall in inward investment and the government is worried about the possibility of a working class explosion throughout the country.

translated from <http://www.ibrp.org/it/articles/2009-08-30/condizioni-e-lotte-operaie-nel-mondo>

Rising Resistance?

From China to Korea (see article on Ssangyong on p. 4) across Africa (see p. 2) to Europe the resistance to the attacks on workers is mounting. These attacks are not new, as the article in this issue, “The Cost of the Crisis So Far” shows. Wages as a share of GDP have declined in the capitalist heartlands since the end of the post-war boom in 1973. Whilst the G20 meets to plot the next stage of

the scheme for saving the world bourgeoisie (as we go to

press) the working class is beginning to resist. Naturally this incipient response is episodic and largely involves only the workers who are immediately threatened. Indeed, as at Visteon or in the last strikes at the Lindsey Oil Refinery, workers are only demanding that the capitalists do not renege on existing agreements. Some of these firms’ tricks to deny workers pay, pensions or redundancy rights (see for example Nortel in Belfast where the firm filed for bankruptcy and sacked 87 workers without the 90 day notice) have been so outrageous that even the state’s judicial system has been slow to act against the workers (as in the evictions of Visteon and Vestas workers or in the toleration of the several bosskapping incidents in France when workers took managers of firms which intended to move plant elsewhere hostage).

All these signs of resistance after years of relative class quiet are heartening but, as the weight of the attacks is building up, they will have to develop into a bigger movement with wider goals. Today the idea that if we all work hard for the firm we will all benefit is now just a joke. Everyone can see that the profits we have created for the system enrich the few (whether financiers or the bosses of big companies) and that our share of the wealth is declining. The political system is manipulated by those who control the real wealth (see article on Power in this issue). As Lenin argued there can be no democracy without equality. And by this he meant economic equality and not some universal right to vote every four years or so.

At the same time the bloody wars going around the planet, from Afghanistan to Africa, are not about defending us from terrorism but defending the economic and strategic interest of our rulers. These are no sideshows but the material consequences of a system which provokes such conflicts that take so many innocent lives. The only way that this can be stopped is if those who create the wealth (i.e. the world working class) begin to fight not only the immediate attacks of the capitalists but for a different world. This is as yet some way off and there are many obstacles to be overcome. We have already seen this year how the capitalist press distort strike demands into those that the bourgeoisie can understand (as in the “British jobs for British workers” headlines).

The Vestas Occupation

In some ways Vestas is a tale of our time. When the Danish owners of this plant producing wind turbines decided to shift production to the US claiming it was unprofitable in the UK (in reality their UK state subsidy had run out!) it meant the loss of 600 jobs. A couple of dozen young workers decided to take action themselves.



South Africa

Class Struggle Explodes Once More

They had never been in a union but decided on a sit-in and hastily erected barriers to defend the factory. Against much harassment from the police and the company they held out for 19 days before the company finally got an order to evict them on 7 August. The sit-in got much favourable media coverage but instead of a struggle for the workers it became for "green capitalism" (a nonsense in itself). The struggle was widely supported but not by workers in other factories. One reason was that the occupiers were persuaded to sign up to the RMT union which said that the case could be won by embarrassing the Labour Government into living up to its "green credentials" by nationalising the plant and carrying on production. This line was enthusiastically supported by the TUC, the Campaign against Climate Change (i.e. middle class greens whose agenda is to make the cost of climate change be carried by workers everywhere) and the various Trotskyist left such as the Alliance for Workers Liberty and the SWP. The occupiers soon found that the RMT left them in the dark as to what was going on and started to speak for them. All solidarity action amounted to were token days (more like minutes) of action organised by trades unions who were hostile to real solidarity. There was no attempt to link up with striking posties, railworkers (who are also in the RMT!) or others involved in strike action at the time. Apparently the resin works next door is also earmarked for closure but once the RMT had taken over there was no attempt to unite with them. The other big question mark is the passivity of so many of the other workers who accepted the feeble redundancy terms of the company. Needless to say the Labour Party decided that

We are not going to nationalise because we are sticking to our principles.

Joan Ruddock, Climate Change Minister.

Presumably these principles mean only handing out big pensions to bankers? Thus the whole affair ended up as a circus. The last 6 occupiers were evicted and are now still campaigning outside the factory gates but the whole episode underlines the need for workers to recognise their own agenda is not that of these various capitalist interests as embodied by the groups above. Ultimately workers everywhere will have to recognise that the only permanent way to ensure their living standards is when they take over the running of society themselves.

Since last April's election South Africa has been engulfed in a tide of class struggle which has been the most widespread and bitter since the ANC (African National Congress) came to power 15 years ago. There have been strikes by construction workers bringing work on power stations, railways and football stadiums to a standstill; by miners bringing coal and gold production to a halt; by municipal workers, including bus drivers and garbage collectors leading to the disruption of transport and the piling up of rubbish in the townships and major cities. Telecommunications workers, doctors and even soldiers have also gone on strike. At the same time the seething discontent in the townships and squatter camps has erupted into widespread rioting, with attacks on public buildings and municipal officials who are all ANC placemen. The riots in the townships are of the kind not seen since the worst days of the apartheid regime in the 1980s.

Strikes Win Pay Increases

The massive strikes, in which hundreds of thousands of workers have taken part, and the wave of township rioting have clearly shaken the ANC regime. In the past the ANC has used the unions, with whom it is in alliance, to control class struggle by avoiding strikes or bring them to a speedy end. However, both the erosion of wages by inflation which is now 6.9% and unemployment which is now 33% have built up a reservoir of discontent which is proving difficult for the unions to control. The ANC, which unashamedly stands for the interest of the South African capitalist class, has found it difficult to adapt to a situation of more open class struggle. This has produced a crisis in the ANC itself leading to the ousting of its previous leader Mbeki in September 2008 and a subsequent split in the organisation. The new populist leadership, which emerged under Zuma, came to power promising to address workers' grievances, unemployment and the conditions in the townships. Of course, the ANC regime is unable to carry out these promises at the same time as protecting profits and maintaining the flow of investment capital into the country. Even

temporary concessions to the workers are difficult to implement in today's situation of crisis where the economy is contracting and unemployment is rocketing. The recession is the worst since 1992 and in the first 3 months of this year the economy shrank at an annual rate of 6.4%. Although Zuma promised to create 500,000 new jobs this year, in the first 6 months of the year 475,000 jobs have been lost. The regime has reacted to the strikes with caution. In general most of the strikes have been settled with pay increases only slightly below the workers' demands. Construction workers, miners and municipal workers, for example, got a 13% increase only 2% below their demand. Similarly some strikes were bought off by quite generous pay offers. An illustration of this is the case of power workers who were given a 10.5% increase and a strike, which would have crippled mining production, was averted. Some strikes, such as that at the Impala platinum mine, have not been settled and are continuing as we go to press. However, the pay rises which have been conceded are well above the official rate of inflation and represent real — albeit temporary — gains. In the future such gains will, of course, be clawed back either by inflation or by speedups or both. However, conceding to workers demands shows that, for the present, the South African capitalist class and the ANC regime have decided on a tactical retreat rather than a direct confrontation with the working class.

Township Riots Confronted By Police

When it comes to the township riots the regime has taken a more robust attitude. It has sent in its police force with armoured vehicles and riot gear and the protesters have been confronted with rubber bullets, tear gas and large scale arrests.

Conditions in the townships are, if anything, worse than they were at the end of the apartheid regime. The increase in population, coupled with the corruption and incompetence of the ANC placemen, who fill the government appointed administrative jobs, have more than cancelled out the new housing built in the last 15



years. For millions of people living in the townships there is no proper housing, no electricity, no water and no sewage. On top of this there are no jobs. Over one third of the working population is unemployed and 75% of the jobless are under 35 years old. The anger felt by the young unemployed has boiled over and municipal buildings have been burned and local officials have been attacked. In the Balfour township of Siyathemba, for example, the local ANC mayor was only able to address protesters from the safety of an armoured car which was subsequently pelted with stones. After his attempts to calm the situation the protesters torched his second home, burning it to the ground. The fact that such an official can have a second home while millions are homeless indicates the corruption running through the entire ANC political machine. One resident of Siyathemba summed up his frustrations as follows;

We fought the apartheid government but now we are going nowhere. There are no roads there is no water. All the jobs go to relatives of officials.¹

These events show the unemployed proletariat revolting against its desperate conditions once again, and, once again being confronted by the violence of the state. The issues and the reaction of the ruling class are in essence identical to what occurred under the apartheid regime. Only instead of the forces of repression being white police firing live ammunition at the protesters the forces of repression are black police firing rubber bullets and tear gas. The direct parallel between these events and the township riots of the 80s show precisely how the ANC government has taken over the role of the apartheid government.

Although Zuma has supported the view that the problems arise from a few corrupt officials, and has appealed for patience while he cleans out these rotten apples, and many

have accepted this, these events also indicate a weakening of the ability of the ANC to confront the class struggle. The mask of defender of all black people against the wicked whites, which it has worn for so long, is finally slipping to reveal its true face; the face of defender of capitalism against all resistance of the working class.

The Real Role of African Nationalism

The coming to power of the ANC after decades of attempts to enforce racial divisions brought with it many illusions. It was argued by many on the left that apartheid was necessary for ensuring the profits of South African capitalism and its removal would somehow usher in a transition to socialism and that African Nationalism should be supported by the working class for this reason. The ANC itself, which has never even nominally opposed capitalism, argued that all the country's problems stemmed from the antiquated racial divisions and once these were removed all would be well for everyone. 15 years of ANC rule and the present strikes and riots have revealed the absurdity of these views. In fact the key issue in SA has always been one of class and organisation of the exploitation of the working class. The racial issue has simply been used to divide the working class and weaken its struggle and the ANC was brought to power precisely to control workers' struggles and restore profitability of SA capitalism. As we wrote in RP 9:

The ANC was brought to power in the 1990s by the capitalist class as a whole. This was done to rescue SA capitalism from the catastrophic situation the apartheid had produced in its last 2 decades in power. Because of its populist appeal and its wide social base, the ANC was best placed to calm the social revolt, and to pacify and discipline the working class.

It is the ANC's boast that it has succeeded in doing these things. Since 1994 it has increased profits, achieved economic growth of 5% or more each year and attracted billions of dollars in foreign direct investment. One only has to glance at townships like Siyathemba to understand at whose expense this has been achieved. At the same time ANC officials have used the power of the state to establish themselves as members of the bourgeois class and have made the transition from political prisoner to millionaire without the slightest concern for the condition of the workers.²

With the onset of the present economic crisis the ideologies which have served the ANC so well are being undermined. The recent strikes, like those of 2004, 2001 and 1999 have had no racial element to them whatsoever. The issue is simply one of class. However many workers still see the ANC as their only hope as indicated by the 66% of the vote it achieved in the April election, This is a great mistake and one which is being challenged by deeds. The root cause of the problems of the South African proletariat is the same as that of the proletariat worldwide, namely the capitalist system of production.

The SA working class fought under the banners of African Nationalism and shed its blood to install the ANC in power. This has created a reservoir of illusion which makes a break with the ANC more difficult. It is, however, necessary for the working class to break entirely with the forces of African Nationalism and its allies, namely the trade unions and SA communist party. These are political forces which stand squarely behind the capitalist system of production and its continuation. Their programmes of public spending or nationalisations of sectors of the SA economy are simply reforms to capitalism. All the dreams of reforming the system to make it serve workers' interests are simply illusions. The working class needs to support its own interests independently of all other classes. The struggle for its own interests needs to be oriented towards the overthrow of the capitalist system itself and the unity of workers worldwide in this cause.

CP

Footnotes

¹ See video <http://multimedia.thetimes.co.za/videos/2009/07/calm-restored-to-siyathemba-township/>

² Mzi Khumalo ex Robben Island prisoner became head of JCI, a mining house and was reported in the Guardian 22 April 1999 as saying "I have spoken to the unions at JCI and made it clear we are here to run a business. I am not for any of this brotherhood stuff."

South Korea

Ssangyong Occupation Ends In Defeat



On 5 August the 77 day strike and occupation at the Ssangyong car plant came to an end. This militant struggle of 1700 workers which has received virtually no coverage in the official western media started back in May as a struggle against mass redundancies in the wake of the company filing for bankruptcy.

The Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation

The Ssangyong Motor Company of Pyeongtaek near Seoul, is owned by the Chinese Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation which acquired a 51% share in the firm about three years ago. Since the take over, a process of reducing the workforce of 8,700 has been going on. By the time the company filed for bankruptcy in February of this year it had been reduced to 7000 and had been transferring much of the plant's machine tools to China. This will sound familiar to former Longbridge workers as this is why the same company acquired Rover at about the same time. The plant was shut and the assembly line taken to China. Exploiting cheap Chinese living labour with the "dead labour" of existing machines in older established industries seems to be the general strategy for Chinese state capitalism to boost profit rates. However as the plant was actually set up via Korean state subsidies the Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation has to go through the procedure of trying to re-float the enterprise. The plan for the re-financing of the firm required substantial cost cutting to be achieved by a large number of lay offs. Following this, the company fired 300 casual workers and sought to force another 1700 into early retirement. It was from the ranks of the latter that the occupiers came.

The Occupation

The all out strike and occupation of the plant began on 22 May. The workers' demands included no lay-offs, no casualisation and no outsourcing of jobs. The casualisation of the labour force has constituted a significant attack on the working class in South Korea as casuals earn substantially less than regular workers and have no job security. Recent legislation ostensibly intended to give casual workers job security after 2 years has only encouraged employers to fire workers as they come up to 2 years of service. This is how "reforms" operate under decaying capitalism. Every so-called reform makes workers worse off sooner or later and in the current stage of the capitalist crisis there is no question that we will be made to pay. This is why workers under attack are responding by trying to deny the use of the plant to the bosses.

Initially the Ssangyong occupation continued with little intervention by the state authorities, partly due to a crisis within the ruling class following the suicide of the 'left-leaning' ex-president Noh Mu Hyeon, and subsequent large scale demonstrations against the right wing government, in protest against the effects of the world economic crisis. However as time went on the state began to release its arsenal of oppression against the striking workers. On June 16 an anti-strike rally of scab workers and hired thugs took place outside of the factory. During this time around 700 workers from the nearby Kia car plant joined the strikers to defend the occupation. The workers decided to base the occupation in the paint shop, the idea that the flammable chemicals may deter the police from launching an attack which may result in the paint shop being destroyed and loss of life.

Towards the end of June, the State's attacks on the workers intensified. On June 26 and 27 violent clashes took place between the workers and a combination of employer hired thugs and scabs and, the riot police. Workers fought back with iron bars and Molotov cocktails but the bosses managed to secure the main factory building with the workers retreating to the paint shop as planned. More violent attacks followed and gas and water supplies to the factory were cut off. As well as physical confrontation the company and the state employed psychological pressure by flying police helicopters over the plant round the clock to deprive the workers of sleep. Water and gas supplies were turned off (but not initially electricity for safety reasons). The workers had to resort to collecting rainwater and improvising toilets after the WCs were blocked. Conditions in the hot summer were distinctly grim. The state also sought to intimidate individual workers with legal action by suing them for huge sums of money for loss of revenue resulting from the occupation.

The response of the workers' union, the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), was to formally support the "illegal" occupation but not to go further in challenging the state. Instead they called for a half day general strike of metal workers which led to a rally in support of the Ssangyong workers in front of the factory. On July 4th and 11th the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) held a series of workers' rallies across the country. However the occupying workers effectively remained isolated and imprisoned within the factory.

On 20 July the authorities commenced their final assault on the factory; around 200 riot police surrounded the factory and teargas was sprayed from helicopters. The workers responded by launching

Molotov cocktails and catapults at the police. The KCTU responded by calling a two day general strike, and strikes were called by the KMWU. However these actions were limited and formalistic. On 25 July a rally

economic crisis. Although at a far higher level of participation and militancy, the lessons from Ssangyong are essentially the same as those we have seen recently, albeit on a smaller scale in the UK at

structures can be recouped by the unions.

Ssangyong illustrates the urgent need for revolutionary minorities to increase their presence in the

working class and to assist the process of development of class consciousness. In this period any economic struggle must also have a conscious political dimension if the class struggle is to go forward. Embryonically the occupying workers came to realise this. In a press conference they gave at the factory gates on 27 July one worker finished by saying;



outside of the Pyeongtaek railway station in support of the strikers led to a further violent confrontation with the police. By the end of July the police and company thugs recaptured all of the plant with the exception of the paint shop. On 1st August the company finally cut off the electricity supply to the paintshop and by 5 August after further battles, the occupation was ended.

Defeat

The strike ended with an almost total defeat for the workers. The settlement finally agreed with the KMWU resulted in 52% of the strikers being given early retirement with some severance pay whilst the other 48% were offered a year's unpaid leave with a vague commitment from the firm to re-hire them after a year if economic conditions permit. Even after the strike ended, the state has continued to arrest and detain individual militants and workers are also facing the prospect of further damages claims from the company. From the information we have received approximately 5 workers committed suicide as a result of the pressures arising from the strike.

What Can We Learn from Ssangyong?

The struggle at Ssangyong is not atypical of industrial workers' responses to the severity of the

Visteon and Vestas. Factory occupations no matter how militant are unlikely to succeed without a broader generalisation of the struggle. Whilst obviously essential, it is not enough that the strikers received support from their local communities and that workers from other factories joined rallies and demonstrations in support, because ultimately the struggle remained isolated within the factory gates. The demonstrations and half day 'solidarity actions' organised by the unions were predictably useless and merely served to ghettoise the Ssangyong strikers. In a period of a generalised attack on the working class, our class can only fight back effectively with a generalised response which means not only solidarity actions but other workers joining in the struggle for their own demands. This means going beyond the trade unions which seek to isolate and compartmentalise the working class by trade and by employer. At some level there appears to have been some recognition of this by the Ssangyong strikers who within the factory, adopted an organisational form which appeared on the face of it to be outside of the union structure. The workers formed about 50 struggle groups, comprising of 10 workers. Each group, or chojang, elected a delegate to participate in a co-ordinating committee. But without a wider perspective for generalisation even these democratic fighting

... We have been doing our best to solve this dispute with the principle of peaceful settlement with dialogue. Nevertheless, if this kind of brutal, deadly repression continues, we openly declare our resolute will to fight to the death..

Those of us in here will show our determination to die to the world not only as workers but also as human beings.

(taken from Loren Goldner's article at <http://libcom.org/news/ssangyong-motors-strike-south-korea-ends-defeat-heavy-repression-17082009>).

Here is a glimmer of insight that what they were doing was fighting not just for Korean jobs but for the future of humanity. This is a task which only the world working class can carry out. In the end the fight is not just for our jobs but against the state which protects capitalists and their "right" to dispose of us a mere appendages to their machines. Materially "Workers of the World" are uniting in struggles across the planet. What they need to do is recognise consciously that we have to replace this inhumane social system with one which addresses human needs. To achieve it we have to unite politically in a world proletarian party so that the ruling classes will once again tremble at the prospect of a workers' revolution.

PBD

From Prometeo 1 (series VII) July 2009

The Cost of the Crisis So Far

Whether or not the danger has been averted, whether there really is a flicker of light at the end of the tunnel: in short, whether there are solid grounds for the stubbornly optimistic view of many capitalists that the crisis is almost over or whether this is simply a way of taking 'people's' minds off things, only time can tell. However, it is certainly convenient for many to see (or pretend to see) a lantern every time there's a flicker of light, deluding themselves that the darkness is not so black as they'd once thought. Then again, wasn't it that master of propaganda, the incomparable President of the Council¹, who happened to say one day that the crisis is only a psychological problem? According to him, if everyone pretended the crisis didn't exist and kept on spending and squandering a dangerous bout of pneumonia would turn into a harmless cold. The superficiality of such notions provokes embarrassment when they are expressed in such a vulgar way but basically, once the typically theatrical figures of speech of the 'premier' are removed, this is the accepted wisdom

years or more the international bourgeoisie has followed exactly the opposite course with a policy of progressively restricting the market, that is the masses' capacity to consume. In other words, the systematic lowering of wages both in the capitalist metropolises and in the periphery. But this fierce attack on wages is not the outcome of a simple political choice based on the nastiness of the bourgeoisie who, at a certain point, have chosen to ransack the pockets of the proletariat almost as if they had grown tired of the so-called 'Fordist compromise' and its relatively secure and decent wages. On the contrary, the roots of the market turbulence are to be found where the commodities which finish up on the market originate — in the sphere of production with its antagonistic social relations between capital and labour power. Capital only survives and develops at the expense of labour power. So long as things are going well it is capable of conceding the famous crumbs to the wage slaves (in fact, this is to their direct advantage); but when, as a result of this antagonism, things start to go badly — and sooner or later

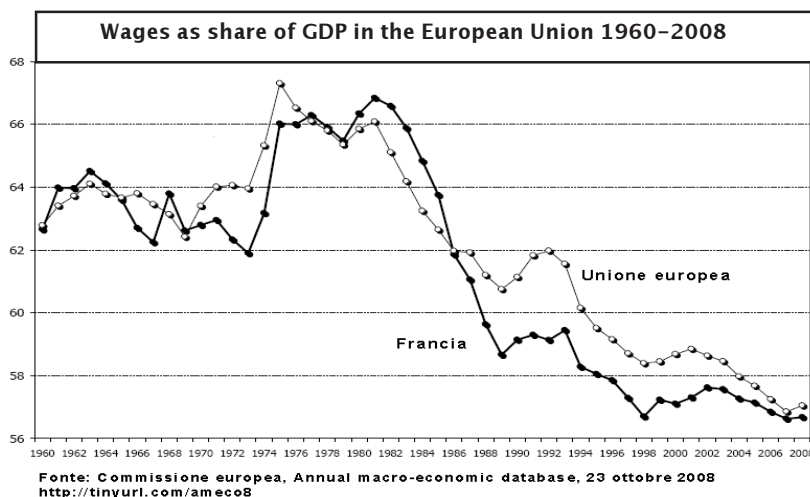
such a vital necessity that capital cannot permit itself to ignore it if it wants to at least try to hold up the degenerative course of its illness. Redundancies, temporary contracts and permanent job insecurity, reduced purchasing power of wages, these are the indispensable weapons paraded by the capitalists over the last thirty or more years which, together with the 'magical' power of money², that is financial speculation carried to paroxysm, was supposed to revitalise the world economy. Thus, if the tendency for the average rate of profit to fall has been slowed down or temporarily neutralised by such counter-tendencies, it has not been annulled.

These are the underlying reasons for the deteriorating conditions amongst which the proletariat — and even part of the petty bourgeoisie — is obliged to live, in Italy and throughout the world.

High Exploitation, Low Wages

The figures published by the OECD in mid-May on Italy's low wage rates and which provoked the usual ephemeral clamour in the media, were in reality a timely confirmation of research by various institutes and economists of various ideological persuasions, most of whom cannot be suspected of harbouring particular proletarian sympathies. For example, the Bank of Italy, in a report at the end of April, revealed that from 1993 to 2008:

the percentage of poor people (people with an income of less than 60 per cent of the average) belonging to these two categories [those dependent on a wage and self-employed, ed.] has jumped from 27 to 31 per cent amongst workers and to 8 per cent amongst the self-employed.³



of a wide section of the serious bourgeoisie — reformists included, naturally — who see the re-launch of consumer spending and maintaining wage levels as the principal means for getting out of the difficult economic situation. For those who have the job of starting this re-launch it is not so easy — and the right and left bourgeoisie disagree about how to do it — given that the crisis has exploded with such devastating force precisely because for the past thirty

they must go badly — the only option is to attack those who are dependent on wages and the weakest strata in society to try and pump oxygen into a rate of profit (the heart of the system) which is having increased difficulty breathing. Thus, just as imperialism is not one policy amongst many for this or that bourgeoisie, a defect of capitalism, but is capitalism's very mode of being in our epoch, in the same way the intensification of exploitation is

Is it an accident that in July 1993 the general agreement on labour contracts was signed which accelerated and intensified the so-called settlement? Obviously not, as some left members of CGIL⁴ more or less openly admit, without however drawing the obvious conclusions. This same union has tried to quantify the loss of purchasing power for wages/salaries. Payments have all gone up: but only for the murky

benefit of taxation trickery.

In the last 15 years every worker has given the taxman an average of €6,738: for the State that means it has benefited by 112 billion euros, one of the major supply of funds that has prevented the return of fiscal

In essence, not only has the slice of the cake allotted to the proletariat (which made the whole cake) been reduced, but there has been a big increase in the number of mouths whose teeth are biting into that slice. On the other hand, as we have mentioned, this is a global phenomenon. It could not be

Once again, then, capitalism has not forgotten its own interests and by devaluing labour power, that is lowering wages, it has one of the most powerful means — perhaps the most powerful — to offset the tendential fall in the average rate of profit. Without going into details, it

is illuminating to compare the measures employed by capital in the 1920s and the strategies adopted today. In Germany in 1924, after the defeat of the last — badly prepared — revolutionary onslaught, working hours were extended to 10 hours per day and wages were reduced. In the United States during the 'Roaring Twenties',



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drag.⁵ [Government spending overrunning tax receipts, trans.]

But independently of this increase in tax revenue which all governments of whatever stripe have carried out, wages themselves have fallen by an average of €1,900 between 2002 and 2007, a figure which is no laughing matter, especially when taking account of the fact that more than 14 million workers must live on less than €1,300 per month and around 7.3 million on less than €1,000.⁶ In order not to leave any doubt about the huge extent of the robbery being carried out at the expense of the proletariat, with the complicity — as Minister Sacconi loves to say — of the unions, it's worth reporting what one of the most lucid minds amongst Italian reformist intellectuals has written, someone who nowadays appears almost an extremist, such is the miserable state of bourgeois-reformist thinking:

...the share of wages in GDP: in Italy between 1979 and 2007 that share had fallen by almost 13 per cent. At present it constitutes only 55% of GDP, even if wage earners in regular work and therefore included in the State's figures have grown in the meantime by several million.⁷

otherwise, given that capitalism 'reigns' over the whole planet. Perhaps the only difference is to be found in the sharpness of the proletariat's diminishing share which in Italy is particularly acute. An examination of the data on wages' share of GDP reveals the same picture everywhere, the only difference being the amount. Between 1982 and 2005 wages' share fell from 47.6% to 30.2%, in the G7 from 67.5% to 61.5%, in China, that paradise of globalised capitalism, from 53.6% to 41.4%.⁸

These figures, already eloquent enough in themselves, probably depict — and certainly do for the USA — a better picture than reality. In the US, for example, those who Marx called the 'officials of capital' — that is to say the administrators, directors, managers, the people who, whatever their role in the firm, get an 'income' sometimes hundreds of times higher than the wages of a general labourer. It's even better for workers in the ex-Soviet bloc countries — another Eden where freedom has been regained — where, taking account of inflation and increased productivity,

in recent years, the decline of wages is higher ... in relation to Western countries.⁹

the frenetic years of expansion in consumption based on debt and financial speculation, the average wage clearly fell or else, in the 'best' case, remained unchanged. Obviously this means that the rate of surplus value went up although, given how things turned out, this was not enough to prevent the crisis of 1929.¹⁰ Today one of the most bourgeois of economists, perhaps for effect, condescends to use Marxist terms and talks about an increase in the rate of surplus value and the rate of profit in Italy between 1993 and 2003, but the net outcome is what we see today in front of our eyes.¹¹ This is because, no matter how large the mass of surplus value that is extorted by every means possible from the working class¹², this must always be related to the whole of investment capital and in the end cannot be enough to adequately remunerate capital, thus beginning the downward phase of the cycle and all the measures designed to lift the rate of exploitation, increase that notorious competitiveness of firms, until in the end they rebound against the system in general. 'Old Karl' noted ironically that every capitalist aims to lower the wages of his own workers while he would like to see the wages of others increase in order to sell at a lower price — at a competitive price! — on a strong and expanding market. And

today the capitalists all over the world are doing and hoping for exactly the same things. However, once the vicious circle of the crisis started it wasn't so much that 'private vices' have become 'public virtues' but rather they are generalised 'vices', i.e. part of the sharpening of the crisis itself.

For example, even if temporary jobs and short-term employment contracts — the scourge of contemporary capitalism, which affect between 13 and 33% of the European labour force (but amongst younger workers the percentage is much higher) — are a kind of miraculous potion for the bosses, in the sense that they have a blackmailable workforce at their disposal, ready to use at the 'right' moment and at the 'right' price; in the long run they contribute to the shrinking of the 'market', given that the intermittent and generally lower wages reduce the so-called capacity to consume of a solid portion of citizens. In Germany, which has an economy oriented towards exports:

the number of poor workers — where 'poor' signifies getting two thirds or less of the average wage — has exceeded 22% of the total workforce. A recent source says that there are about 5 million 'mini-jobs' and around 2 million workers get €800 or less per month.¹³

Overall, in Europe there are more than thirty million people in precarious jobs; 5 million of them in Great Britain and 6 million in Spain.¹⁴ Yet again, though, it is the United States which has led the way for the whole world to follow. The country of Uncle Sam takes first prize for the unstoppable growth of the 'working poor', of workers tired out by the end of the month (when they make it), up to their neck in debt even to the point of losing their house; all well before the subprime bubble that was inflated with the money — or rather the non-money — of the poor burst in the face of the world economy. In December 2008 the Washington Post signalled that in the world's number one imperialist power, "63% of the population are now experiencing a drop in income".¹⁵ In the same period an ILO report (International Labour Organisation, agency of the UN) drew a picture of the outlook for the future which has so far been confirmed. According to the ILO, worldwide unemployment would grow in 2009, from a minimum of 18 million people up to, in the worst hypothesis, a maximum of 51 million people and the advanced countries would not be the last to be affected. In addition to these figures a further 200 million could be added to include

workers who would fall into poverty — particularly in the capitalist periphery — above all because they would fall into the grey area of the 'informal' or black economy which, moreover, in the space of a decade would swell to include two thirds of the labour force, that is to say 1.8 billion people.¹⁶

Increasingly Insecure Jobs

In case these predictions are not borne out in reality, let's keep with the hard facts, where they are available. These confirm that in the USA from the end of 2008 the number of people without a job has increased at an average rate of 600,000 per month. Thus, in one year the official unemployment rate

Conditions in the US

have deteriorated further since this article was written.

The number of working US citizens turning to free government food stamps (worth \$80 a month) has surged [to 35 millions or 11.6% of the population]...whilst this increase is often attributed to unemployment - which yesterday hit 9.7% - the FT has learnt that some 40% of the families now on food stamps have "earned income", up from 25%.

This only confirms what this article argues - that, as the FT puts it "wages and benefits have decelerated".

Quotations and figures from the *Financial Times* September 5/6 2009

increased by more than three percentage points which by April meant 8.5% of the labour force or about 13 million people. (By May it was beyond 9%.) However if it's also taken into account that, in order to avoid complete closure, many firms have reduced the working week to around 33 hours (obviously with a cut in wages) and that nine million workers are now obliged to work part-time (the majority of them women); and then if the number of those who have supposedly stopped looking for work and who don't appear in the figures are taken into account, then the real level of unemployment rises to 15.6%.¹⁷

However, in Europe things are not much better. Even though, as we said, the bourgeois politicians are obstinately radiating flawless optimism the EU's statisticians and economists are continually revising the figures for GDP and unemployment downwards. Behind the smiles and the reassuring tone

there is the fear that the dams which protect 'social cohesion' will be suddenly broken by a spontaneous wave of all-out struggle by the proletarian class. Poverty, or rather reduction of workers' income is, as we have seen, a generalised fact whilst social security or welfare benefits, official or otherwise — which up until now have curbed the effects of the multi-decennial (that is, structural) crisis could well be insufficient if things should happen like this. In Spain — ex-miracle economy country — unemployment is already over 17% and, according to Eurostat, is in danger of reaching 20 or more per cent in 2010. In a year unemployment throughout Europe has risen to 8.9%. This means 14,158 million unemployed (2.8 million more than in March 2008) in the euro zone and 20,150 million for the EU as a whole.¹⁸ Thus the ECB (European Central Bank) warns that even if the upturn predicted by the crystal ball gazers (itself included) materialises, unemployment will continue to rise, up to 10.5%.¹⁹

And, what's happening in the Bel Paese? Even though Italy is fortunate in having a President of the Council with the miraculous powers of a medieval king, things are following the same general tendency. Official unemployment, which stood at 6.2% in 2007, has now increased by a further 1.8%. According to official figures, the building sector has lost 250,000 jobs but the existence of the black economy, which is prevalent in this sector, makes an exact calculation impossible. The play within the play is that the most affected, obviously, are immigrant workers who in some areas, such as Lombardy, comprise around half the workforce in building. For immigrant workers as a whole and obviously not only building workers, the decline in available jobs means the loss of residency status and the grim prospect of being pushed into living and working clandestinely. The point is that many immigrants have been in Italy for years — forming the backbone of the labour force in many factories — and have families and children who go to school here. Aside from the loss of wages, which is no small thing, it is not difficult to imagine the huge problems that losing the legal right to remain would bring.

However, if the building sector is weeping, metal engineering is far from laughing. In one year alone output in this sector fell by 30%. By March the CIG (Cassa Integrazione or pool of laid-off workers getting a reduced holding salary) had increased by 1,014% and in April by

1,400%. At the same time employment in the biggest firms fell by 1.6% and the number of metal workers overall fell by 144,000. Over the next few months 41% of all metal engineering works predict they will cut personnel.²⁰ A glimpse at the local situation in the province of Reggio Emilia — one of the most industrialised in Italy — bears this out. In February 9,000 workers were laid off in the cassa integrazione scheme. By the end of April there were 19,000 in the ordinary scheme and 2,000 in the extraordinary²¹ and the industrial output figures showed a drop of 30 to 70 per cent. The same socio-economic earthquake has hit many industrial sectors which until recently were hailed as the ultimate in competitiveness and Italian creativity. For example, the 'bedding sector' in Puglia has experienced a swathe of shutdowns and job losses or lay-offs in the cassa integrazione. The latter, however, has given the bosses the opportunity to play the same old trick as the

from this scheme). Now, it's true that the government and especially the regions have designed some more tin pot schemes for the unemployed and unprotected workers but, being optimistic, this still spells widespread poverty, if only because they expressly do not cover wide areas of insecure jobs and unemployment (see, for example, the agreement drawn up between the region of Lombardy—the bosses—unions).

Returning to the field of social security protection. The CGIL predicts that in 2009 there will be a million more unemployed, while the more optimistic Confindustria (the bosses' organisation) says 600,000. The fact is that, so far, according to the CGIL, 400,000 temporary workers have not had their contract renewed and on top of this can be added a further 200,000 public employees who are set to lose their job in the next two years as a result of the targets set by Minister Brunetta, whose anti-statist fervour is

those nearest pensionable age and who have defined pension contributions which are entirely dependent on the performance of the funds.

It takes the bloated face of a union bureaucrat to say these things without blushing, seeing that it was the unions who signed every one of the agreements designed to weaken and dismantle the old pension system (i.e. the robbery of final salary pension schemes), pushing and eventually forcing workers to subscribe to private pension funds, managed, at least in part, by the unions themselves. If we didn't know these types we would be disconcerted as we remembered the arrogance and derision met out to anyone who criticised their activities at the union meetings which they'd called to lure in the workers with their fantasy about the advantages of pension reform. Now what are they going to propose in the face of this massive disaster? The usual idiocies.

British Figures Confirm that Everywhere Workers Are Paying the Price for the Capitalist Crisis:

In August 2009 official UK unemployment stood at 2.49 million. 1 in 6 households are now without a wage earner.

1 in 5 18-24 year olds; 400,000 (or 5%) of 25-34 year olds live with their parents and a similar proportion of 35-45 year olds have moved back with parents. [ICM Research September 2008]

25% of manufacturers have cut working hours and many more are considering following suit, according to research from the EEF, the industry body for engineering and manufacturing employers. [The Guardian 13 March 2009]

1 in 3 public sector organisations are planning redundancies with at least 10 per cent of the workforce set to lose their jobs. Redundancies have already begun in nearly 50% of district councils. [The Financial Times 12 August 2009]

10% of firms are certain to cut jobs and 40% are considering lay offs. [British Chamber of Commerce August 2009]

Over 20% of people in employment (5.79 million) work more than 45 hours a week. Office of National Statistics 2009

87% of defined benefit (mainly final salary) pension schemes were now closed to new members. 18% also no longer take contributions from existing members. [The Financial Times 31 August 2009]

industrial capitalists. Briefly, they, or rather the workers who have been laid off in the CIG, are re-employed by the same bosses who pay them a wage of between €2–2.5 an hour; between this lowest of wages and the CIG payment a more or less 'normal' salary is put together while the bosses make a great saving on their wages' bill and shove a large part of the cost of variable capital onto the wider social collectivity.²²

Although the CIG is undoubtedly a significant social insurance scheme — even if it doesn't pay out the 80% of salary that the bosses and politicians claim but more like 60–65% (which means a breadline income) — in any case it includes no more than 50% of wage workers at any one time (around 7.5 million people; all the others, not to mention casual and temporary workers, are excluded

reminiscent of an old cartoon figure, a drunken superhero for the rich who robs the poor in order to further enrich his protected few.

For the moment we can pause here to make an overview of the devastating effects of the crisis on the proletariat, whilst at the same time not forgetting that many pensioners are also paying a high price. In a document prepared for the G20 in London, the ETUC (European Trades Union Confederation) observed,

The pension funds within the OECD lost 3,300 billion dollars in the value of their shares, that is 20% in real terms in 2008, due to falling values in the stock markets, of hedge funds and structured financial products. The immediate impact of the crisis will be felt above all by

Empty calls for greater financial control, for more equal wealth distribution, for a sense of moral responsibility by institutions. In short, they make out that the beast of the market can be tamed when, however, it is not tameable. The market is a monster and only obeys the demands of profit, and in fact, of the highest possible profit: that is its nature. All the rest doesn't matter in the slightest. It is an illusion.

Productivity, Profit and The (currently latent) Struggle of the Working Class

Despite all the possible counter-measures which have been taken over the last thirty years to increase the amount of surplus value extorted and provide an adequate amount for the valorisation of capital; amongst

them and not least, the lengthening of the working day, the results for the (real) process of accumulation have been far from brilliant. Everywhere the bosses insist and persist with this route because they know no other. 'Increase productivity', yells Brunetta. 'Increase productivity', says Federica Guidi, president of the young industrialists:

*We must increase productivity ... work more hours, 41, 42, 43 and review the number of holidays: four or five weeks a year are too much, as are the number of sick days.*²³

However, it is already the case that at least half of wage earners (workers and employees with 'permanent' jobs and legally registered) work more than forty hours a week²⁴ and this phenomenon is certainly not peculiar to Italy. Granted, the 'productivity problem' in Italy is due — as economists of various persuasions maintain — to the fragmented productive apparatus, i.e. the abnormal presence of small enterprises whose only hope of

maintaining competitiveness is by pushing down the cost of labour or rather turning the screws on the working class. On the other hand, industrial restructuring, the introduction of new, higher 'performing' machinery, leads in general to the expulsion of labour power and, thus, for the proletariat it's a situation of falling from the frying pan into the fire. In the long term this is also the case for capitalism itself because it narrows the basis for valorisation. Certainly, during the upward part of the accumulation cycle, the comparative reduction in labour power (in relation to the capital invested) is accompanied by real growth but, at the moment, there is no sign of this on the horizon. Here then is the source of the 'doggedness' of capital towards its workers, who must be continually more flexible: about wages, hours, shifts, their entire life. For the proletariat it means a leap backwards fifty, hundred or so years, but with a difference: today the proletariat is atomised, with no hope of a better future, subdued by the historical delusion of the collapse of

'real socialism', intoxicated by bourgeois ideology, by a consumerism (in the West) which has led it to ape the lifestyle of the petty bourgeoisie. These disagreeable facts are responsible not only for the loss of class consciousness, but also for the decline in simple class identity, which has undermined workers' will and capacity to struggle, something for which we also have to thank the political operations of the unions and parties 'of the left'. Last, but not least, it is thanks also to the absence of a revolutionary political reference point. Up to now the class response to the capitalist offensive has — with some exceptions — come nowhere near the level of the attacks. Nevertheless, it is true that things can suddenly be turned round for in the past this has been the pattern of a class revival which, if and when it happens, as we truly want to see, then it certainly will be neither painless nor straightforward. We will take up this argument again later ...

Celso Beltrami

Footnotes

1 The official title of Italy's head of government is Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri, literally 'President of the Council of Ministers', usually referred to in English as the 'Prime Minister'. In other words, Silvio Berlusconi, well known outside Italy for his media empire, constant ability to escape prosecution for corruption, famous advice to the survivors of the L'Aquila earthquake to pretend they were camping and seedy philandering with prostitutes and minors.

2 Hjalmar Schacht, Hitler's creative minister in charge of the economy, wrote an apposite book entitled, 'Money Magician' in order to strengthen the illusion of the bourgeoisie that money in itself can magically create more money, more wealth, by leapfrogging over the process of production of commodities and therefore of surplus value. Quoted by Ester Fano in 'The capitalist countries from the world war to the crisis of '29' in AA.VV. *The Crisis of Capitalism in the 1920s*, De Donato, 1978, p.99.

3 *Il Manifesto*, 22.4.09.

4 Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) with a membership of over 5.5 million.

5 Agostino Megale, director of the IRES, the research centre of CGIL, reported in *Il Manifesto* 28.3.09.

6 Paolo Ciofi, *Voyage Around Working Italy*, [Viaggio nell'Italia del lavoro] CalicEditore, 2008 p.33.

7 Luciano Gallino, *La Repubblica*, 9.1.09.

8 Michel Husson, 'The Tendency for the Rate of Exploitation to Increase' ['La hausse tendancielle du taux d'exploitation'] in *Un pur capitalisme*, Editions Page Deux, 2008.

9 Devi Sacchetto, 'Mobility of the Labour Force and Capital' ['Mobilità della forza lavoro e del capitale'] in AA.VV. *La Lunga Accumulazione Originaria*, Edizioni Ombre Corte, 2009 p.148.

10 Leon Sartre *The Marxist Theory of Periodic Crises* [Théorie marxiste des crises périodiques] Ed. Marcel Riviere et al. 1937, pp 38-40. See also 'Considerations on the Composition and Recomposition of the Class with Globalisation' [Considerazioni sulla composizione e ricomposizione di classe nella 'mondializzazione' del capitale] in *Prometeo* #6, 2002.

11 Geminello Alvi, *A Republic Based on Revenue* [Una repubblica fondata sulle rendite], 2006 p.60.

12 Amongst these means are the non-compliance with the most elementary safety standards at work, so much so that in Italy between 2003 and 2006 there were more workers killed than American soldiers in Iraq: 5,252 as against 2,978. Even though this phenomenon particularly

distinguishes the bloody character of Italian bosses (see also the recent Safety report [Testo Unico sulla Sicurezza], it is part of a growing tendency world wide. According to the ILO there were 2,200,000 deaths at work in 2004, 200,000 more than in the previous year. Furthermore, for every fatal 'accident' there were four deaths as a result of workplace diseases and, to finish this list of crimes by the bourgeoisie and its lackeys, in the same year there were 270,000,000 non-fatal 'accident' victims. Figures reported in P. Ciofi op.cit. pp 104 and 109.

13 Luciano Gallino, 'Decline of the Union, Between Crisis of Representation and an Uncertain Future' ['Declino del sindacato tra crisi di rappresentanza e sfide future'] in *Nuvole*, #34, October 2008.

14 *La Repubblica*, 9.2.09.

15 *Il Manifesto*, 21.12.08.

16 Figures from the OECD, reported by *Il Manifesto* of 8.4.09. According to the ILO workers in the black or 'informal' economy could soon make up 53% of the entire labour force and the working poor, 1.4 billion; in China alone it appears that the number of unemployed forced to return to the countryside from where they came is at least 20 million.

17 4 million workers were forced to go over to part time working after the subprime bubble burst in 2007. The total number of unemployed and underemployed would appear to be about 23.1 million people. See Charles-Andre Udry, 'Emplois: la chute la plus rude depuis les années 1930-31' [Jobs: the sharpest fall since 1930-31] in www.alencontre.org visited 16 March 2009; see also *Il Manifesto* 4.4.09. In May the official unemployment rate was already over 9%.

18 Amongst the unofficial welfare supports (i.e. which are not part of the cassa integrazione (Italy's official system of putting workers into a holding pool for redundancy payments, trans.) or unemployment benefits) first place is without doubt the family which nowadays supports thousands of 'big children', that is youths who cannot leave the family home because their income is either too low or they do not have an income. In any case the mid-May report by the governor of the Bank of Italy, Draghi, (attacked by the ineffectual premier) indicated that 2.6 million workers were totally, or almost totally, without any social welfare benefits. Of these at least 1.6 million are in danger of becoming unemployed or, which is the same thing, of not having their contract renewed. For a more detailed picture, see the article by F. Piccioni in *Il Manifesto* of 6.6.09.

19 *Il Manifesto*, 1.5.09. But even these figures, gathered during the editing of this footnote, have been surpassed with the revelation by Eurostat at the beginning of June that unemployment is now 9.2% of the workforce. Within this bleak framework Spain and Greece are distinguished by a growing countertendency, that is a very small increase in employment. Whether this is due principally to the various government programmes or to a real change in direction for the economy is yet to be seen, but given the present state of things the first hypothesis is the most likely.

20 www.rassegna.it visited 18.5.09; this page said that the number of metal workers in cassa integrazione was between 450,000 and 500,000, i.e. 25-30% of the whole group.

21 *L'informazione*, 1.5.09.

22 Riccardo Jacona (ed.), *Presenza diretta*, Raitre, 15.2.09.

23 *La Repubblica*, 9.2.09.

24 Figures from CGIA de Mestre, reported by *Il Manifesto*, 4.1.09.

Correction

In our last issue we mistakenly referred to the recently formed International Communists who publish the journal *The Commune* as the International Communist Party. This stemmed from a misreading of their first issue and a misunderstanding of a presentation by a Commune speaker who called for the establishment of a new electoral party of the Left. We apologise to them. Thanks to comrades from the CWO, ICC, GIS and *The Commune* for pointing out this error.

**Editors
RP**

British Capitalism and the Miners Strike of 1984–5



In February 1984 the miners in Cortonwood, South Yorkshire learned that their pit had been earmarked for closure. After a pithead meeting they voted for a wildcat strike on March 5th. They were soon to be followed by 6000 other miners. No-one at the time realised that this would lead to the biggest confrontation in the class war in Britain since the Second World War.

Many words have already been written in commemoration from different aspects. Many look on the struggle with a kind of despairing nostalgia, others on a world that has been lost, whilst others have simply focussed on the icons of the time. For those who lived in pit villages the focus has been on the social devastation which followed, as pit after pit was closed down, and with it the only real employment in those areas. Today there are 6000 working underground instead of the 250,000 of 1984. In many villages youth unemployment rose to 70% well into the 1990s. The consequent social breakdown led to drug dealing and criminality on a hitherto unknown scale. By 1994 the Dearne Valley (which runs between Barnsley and Rotherham) was designated one of the three poorest areas in the entire European Union, and Grimethorpe the poorest village in Britain. The whole of South Yorkshire thus became an Objective 1 development zone. Today a shopping centre stands where Cortonwood pit once was, and most of the other pithead sites in South Yorkshire, South Wales and elsewhere have been converted to mini-industrial estates offering low wage jobs to a few workers.

In other areas such as Nottinghamshire, where the miners did not strike, all but 3 pits have been shut (despite promises made that they would not) and here, they have not even bothered to “develop” pithead sites. But the impact of the strike went beyond the miners, and even beyond the shores of the UK, since the victory achieved by the

British ruling class gave confidence to the rulers of other advanced capitalist countries to begin the process of restructuring of their economies in the face of the capitalist crisis. This was largely based on the de-industrialisation of the areas where the old heavy industries were located. In September 1984 we were still able to put this issue in more positive terms.

A victory for the miners will not only clear the way for a renewed offensive by the rest of the British workers who, up till now, have been cowed by unemployment and the catalogue of defeats over the past 5 years. It will also be crucial for the balance of class forces in Europe as a whole: the significance of the British miners strike overshadows all events in the class struggle in Europe since the Polish defeats of 1980-1. The embryonic revival in class struggle, as seen in the Belgian public sector general strike last year, and the struggle of the German metal workers this year, will be tipped towards upsurge or retreat by the outcomes of the present battles in the British coal industry
Workers' Voice 18 (Sept 1984)

Labour and the Capitalist Crisis

This turned out to be true and this article is an explanation not only of how that retreat came about but will also attempt to understand its significance for the future of the working class as a whole. The miners' strike cannot be understood just by looking at 1984–5 alone. Its background was the capitalist crisis which engulfed the world in 1971–3 and which signalled that the post-war boom was over (or, as we would put it, the cycle of accumulation had entered its downward phase). The Heath Government at the time was portrayed as the most right wing Government since the war when it

tried to tackle head on the chronic lack of productivity of British industry (due to a lack of investment, both before and after, the nationalisations of the 1940s). Their solution was simply to make the working class pay by cutting wages (via higher inflation and fewer jobs). It sparked a wave of militancy across all the nationalised industries but particularly in coal. In every case the workers won higher wage rises (even if soon undermined by the going rate for inflation).

In the 1972 strike Arthur Scargill led thousands of miners to blockade the Saltley coking depot and caught the police unawares. This victory of the flying picket was to inspire a similar tactic in 1984. The difference was that the state was ready and in the so-called Battle of Orgreave, for example, the coking works near Rotherham were protected by at least as many police as there were pickets. However back in 1974 the miners not only succeeded in getting higher wages but even forced the Heath Government to call an election on the issue of “who runs the country”. The fact that the Tory Government of the day narrowly lost indicated a widespread class hostility to capitalist restructuring plans. Unfortunately class hostility to capitalist restructuring was not the same as hostility to capitalism. At the time members of the CWO often voiced the view that “money militancy” was not in itself leading to any wider consciousness of the issues at stake as the working class gave more and more support to trades union struggles. As we know the unions have never been revolutionary and indeed their existence is bound up with capitalism. Asking for “a fair day's pay” is not the same as demanding “the abolition of the wages system”. In the pit areas this was stronger than anywhere though every mining community had its minority of so-called “communists”. But these were those who looked to the Stalinist Soviet Union as their model whilst most miners were content to go

down the pit every working day past the sign which had announced since 1947 that this or that pit was "owned by the people". For miners this was not only the culmination of a century or more of struggle but it also meant that you had a job for life. It seemed to give the assurance that you were taking part in a tough job but for the good of the community.

In fact it was a Labour lie. What they should have put above the pit was "owned by the nation" since this reveals that it was not owned by the workers but by those who had "the greatest stake" in the nation – those who really owned the land, the newspapers, the factories, mines and fisheries. The post-war nationalisation of "the commanding heights" of the British economy by a Labour Government is often portrayed as a step towards socialism, by all sides of the ruling class. It was in fact the exact opposite. The state became the collective capitalist in the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole. The position of the workers was not altered by replacing individual capitalists with the state. The individual capitalists did not of course like it (though they got hefty compensations for their clapped out plant) but this was a ruling class in deep crisis. It had "won" a war which had destroyed its overseas markets (gobbled up by its American ally), three quarters of its merchant marine

were lost as Durham pit villages were turned into "category C or D" (which meant you had no hope left). The Labour Party's service to British capitalism has never been in doubt from the moment they (and their union backers) supported the First World War in 1914 right down to the 1970s but the 1940s was "their finest hour" as they established a social state which saved capitalism from even more extreme demands from the workforce.

The Tories narrowly lost both elections in 1974 but the drive to restructure did not end there. Obsessed by balancing the books in a way which looks almost laughable now, the Labour Government called in the IMF in 1976. Prime Minister Wilson, who once promised to use "the white heat of technology" to modernise Britain, resigned presumably because the IMF medicine was too hard to administer. This brought Callaghan and Healey (as Chancellor of the Exchequer) to power and they carried out the cuts demanded by the IMF as a condition for its loans. The decline of the fight of the working class against the crisis began from that moment (and not from Thatcher's arrival in power in 1979). The Labour Government not only used troops to break the fireman's strike but made cuts in health and social security spending as well as imposing a "Social Contract" (widely dubbed the Social

in Thatcher's Government) which was no secret since *The Economist* announced it in May 1978. It summarised the essence of this plan thus;

...Mr Ridley and some of his co-authors have been pondering how to counter any "political threat" from those they regard as the enemies of the next Tory Government... they would like a five part strategy for countering this threat:

** Return on capital figures should be rigged so that an above-average wage claim can be paid to "vulnerable" industries.*

** The eventual battle should be on a ground chosen by the Tories, in a field they think could be won (railways, British Leyland, the civil service or steel).*

** Every precaution should be taken against a challenge in electricity or gas. Anyway, industries in those industries are likely to be required. The group believes that the most likely battleground will be the coal industry. They would like the Thatcher Government to a) build up maximum coal stocks, particularly at power stations; b) make contingency plans for import of coal; c) encourage the recruitment of non-union lorry drivers by haulage companies to move coal where necessary; d) introduce dual coal oil firing in power stations as soon as possible.*

** The group believes that the greatest deterrent to any strike would be "to cut off the money supply to the strikers and make the union finance them". But strikers in nationalised industries should not be treated differently from strikers in other industries.*

** There should be a large mobile squad of police equipped and prepared to uphold the law against violent picketing. "Good non-union drivers" should be recruited to cross picket lines with police protection.*



and was on the brink of losing the Empire which it had entered the war to defend. In this crisis the ruling class also had another weapon to deploy – the Labour Party, itself founded by the trades unions at the beginning of the century. By setting up the welfare state and nationalising loss-making industries the Labour Party conceded the demands of those who thought they had fought the war for "democracy". But their nationalisations were not about "common ownership of the means of production" as the Durham miners in the 1950s and 1960s found out. Nationalisation was but a prelude to rationalisation. Thousands of jobs

con trick) which tried to introduce a wage freeze at a time of high inflation. The "winter of discontent" (1978–9) it provoked spelled the end of Old Labour as a useful tool for the British ruling class and ushered in 18 years of Tory rule.

Background to the Strike

When the Tories arrived in power in June 1979 they had no master plan for solving the capitalist crisis but they had learned from the debacle of the Heath Government. They also had a plan to deal with the miners. This was the Ridley Plan (after Nicholas Ridley who would become a minister

In the end all of this came to pass but not quite according to the schema of Ridley and Co. Thatcher's 1979 election victory was a narrow one. The Tories had won largely because the level of unemployment had tripled to 1.5 million under Labour (an issue made much of in Tory propaganda viz the "Labour isn't working" posters of the Saatchi brothers reproduced on this page). However under Thatcher this was to double again at a time when inflation peaked at 22%. The Thatcher Government became the most unpopular since Neville Chamberlain's in 1940. However the

Tory Government pressed on with so-called anti-trades union legislation which, by outlawing wildcat and solidarity strikes as well as mass picketing actually strengthened the hand of union leaders over the membership. In short the legislation was anti-working class and anti-struggle than anti-union per se. Such legislation though gave the legal framework for what would happen in the miners' strike. However the first clash was not with the miners but with the steelworkers who were initially offered a derisory 2% wage rise (i.e. a large wage cut since inflation was at 20% at that point) in the autumn of 1979. After negotiations only saw the offer raised to 6% (with job losses on top) the steel strike broke out in December 1979. For over thirteen weeks the steel workers struck and carried out many flying pickets to try to stop the movement of steel. In this they were supported by the miners who sent masses to reinforce pickets of private steelworks.. They were not so well supported by their own union (later the ISTC) led by Bill Sirs who did everything he could to get the strike ended on the bosses terms. When the deal was finally announced of a 16% wage rise, but only on condition that thousands of jobs would go, steelworkers in Sheffield publicly burned their union cards en masse.

The steelworkers defeat emboldened the Government. Ian Macgregor was brought in from the US to close much of the steel industry down and make it ready for privatisation (150,000 jobs in both the old British steel and private steelworks went over the next 20 years). And in 1981 the Thatcher Government thought it would take on the miners by announcing the closure of 23 pits. This provoked a spontaneous walkout of pit after pit starting in South Wales and then spreading across the country. The Tories were not yet ready to take on the miners so after a week of hesitation the shutdowns were shelved. This relatively easy victory for the miners was to induce a false sense of security that the miners could win on their own.

Things were also changing on the political front. The Thatcher Government's unpopularity was at a historic low when a diplomatic failure was turned into military victory by the Falklands War. Encouraged by British apparent willingness to let them have the Falklands Islands the Argentine military junta of General Galtieri decided they could be seized without resistance. Galtieri's regime, like Thatcher's was in deep trouble economically and socially so this act of war was intended to divert national attention towards this great achievement. Lord Carrington, the

British Foreign Secretary resigned over the diplomatic blunder, and there was some debate amongst the ruling class as to whether the Falklands were worth fighting for. But the Thatcher junta was desperate to copy Galtieri. Plans to scrap naval vessels were hastily abandoned and an expeditionary force was put together to recapture the islands. It was the political turning point of the 1980s. The "short victorious war"¹ against a weak enemy allowed the British ruling class to swell out their nationalist chests and to claim that Britain was once again a great player in the world. We wrote about the consequences as follows:

The failure of the working class to substantially oppose the Falklands War in 1982 led to a new wave of confidence in ruling class circles. This was reflected in the capitalist press. Until then the bourgeoisie had grave doubts about the open civil war tactics of the Tories. After the riots of the unemployed youth throughout Britain's cities Thatcher was being described as the worst British Prime Minister since Neville Chamberlain. Today there has never been a better prepared offensive by the bourgeoisie than that being carried out by the present Conservative Government.

The Miners' Strike and the Tasks of Communists in Revolutionary Perspectives 22 (Third Series)

The press played their part to the full. The Daily Mail (which had opposed giving asylum to "dirty" Jews in 1938) carried the headline "Smash ASLEF" as a rail strike began at the end of the Falklands War. All the papers pictured a returning troop ship with a banner hung over the side reading "Call off the rail strike or we'll call an air strike". A wave of jingoism not seen for decades swept Britain.

Much of the ruling class' preparation was foreseen in the Ridley Plan but some went beyond even that. The police were militarised and centralised so that they could deploy large numbers to any area and the tactics learned in Northern Ireland were now part of their arsenal. Many of the coal fired power stations were modified to burn oil as well. The workers in the power generation industry and the police were both awarded large pay rises just before the strike broke out. As a result of oil huge stockpiles of coal built up at power stations and a work to rule by miners throughout the winter of 1983-4 to try to reduce it did not make significant inroads. And just to make sure the transport of coal was

moved from the "unreliable" railways (since the railworkers would show class solidarity) to private coal firms staffed either by self-employed lorry drivers or non-union workers. Now the only provocation needed was to make Ian Macgregor who had "butchered" the steel industry head of British Coal.

As the ruling class prepared their position the situation had been moving against the miners in other ways. Once again attacks came from their supposed friends. The Minister for Energy in both Labour Governments had been Tony Benn. He not only shut down 200 pits (with the connivance of the NUM leadership) between 1964-70 but in his second term of office in 1977 introduced a productivity scheme which offered big bonuses for miners in modern mines and nothing for those in older pits. The miners spotted this divisive game and rejected it in a national ballot. Joe (Later Lord) Gormley, the President of the NUM then implemented it area by area thus breaking the national unity of the miners. During the miners strike the miners went on strike area by area, and were roundly condemned in the capitalist press for not holding a national ballot but in 1977 no-one noticed this same "lack of democracy" when Gormley first introduced it. Neither did anyone remember Benn's role as a Labour Minister when he shared platforms with Arthur Scargill during the miners' strike! However the lack of a national ballot was a propaganda gift to the capitalist press. There is also no doubt that it helped undermine class solidarity since the fact that the Nottingham pits (foolishly believing promises that they would not be closed) not only stayed at work but produced a split in the miners' ranks. Union leaders also used it as propaganda to support their own capitalist interests. Bill Sirs (ISTC leader) rewarded the solidarity the miners had shown the steelworkers in 1979-80 by refusing any suggestion of solidarity with the words. "We are not going to sacrifice ourselves on someone else's altar".

The Great Strike

As it was the NUM leaders did not provoke the confrontation. It can even be argued that, as they had already negotiated the closure of half the 23 pits the Tories had wanted to shut in 1981, they were doing all they could to avoid a strike. In fact the spontaneous way in which the strike started and spread was not something the NUM leadership could control, and was more like that of the 1981 confrontation. Even before Cortonwood came out miners in

Barony and Killoch pits in Scotland and Manvers and Wath in South Yorkshire had been on strike for

bosses, who have ranged the whole of the might of the capitalist state against the

will call upon power workers "to work on" to defeat the miners.



three weeks. What made Cortonwood (and Bulcliffe Wood) different was that the miners there produced a leaflet which they took to other pits and then proposed a strike ballot in the Yorkshire area NUM. It was about this time that the disastrous slogan "Coal, not Dole" was adopted. It sounds clever but it posed the struggle as one for the miners alone when, as we wrote at the time, the miners were actually fighting for everyone. But "Coal not Dole" made it look as though this was simply a trade dispute and made it more difficult to get other workers to see the need for solidarity. In short it had the effect of isolating the miners from real solidarity (and we are not belittling the attempts of the various support groups to keep financing the miners to keep them going but the real solidarity that was required had to come from transport workers, dockers and other strategically-placed workers). However speaking to young miners during the strike we found that they thought that they could win on their own and had enormous confidence in the power of their union. Partly this stemmed from the structure of the NUM which was much more run by its members (as the Cortonwood initiative confirms) and less bureaucratic than any other union. But the NUM was still a union and the fact that this was seen as trades dispute and not for what it really was – the future of the working class in Britain, and beyond, played into the bosses hands.

In one of the many leaflets we gave out at the time we called for a generalisation of the struggle
No amount of militant fight by the miners alone will defeat the

miners; they have spent more on defeating the miners, than in fighting the whole Falklands War, and turned whole regions of the country into mini-police states. The key to victory lies in the spread of the struggle to other sections of the working class. Instead of token support, the miners need more active help, like the kind briefly given by some dockers over moving scab coal to Ravenscraig, or the London printworkers who stopped production of The Sun for its attacks on the miners.

But more important is for other workers to launch their own struggles, to open up other fronts in the fightback, and to link these fights with those of the miners, through joint picketing, demonstrations etc. Everywhere workers are facing the same problems as the miners; threats of redundancy, falling real wages, infernal increases in exploitation...

But the same leaflet went on to point to the role of the unions.

Any attempt to generalise and unite the struggles leads to conflict with the trades unions, which divide the workers section by section, and restrain any struggle within the bounds acceptable to capitalism. Thus the TUC has passed meaningless motions in support of the miners which are designed to leave them isolated. The ISTC has openly supported the use of police-escorted scab lorry convoys, and the EPTU has indicated that it

These were not "betrayals" as the Trotskyists at the time tried to maintain but the unions playing their real role for the capitalist state. The miners suffered the biggest onslaught in terms of state violence that we have ever seen since the General Strike of 1926. In the mini-police states we referred to above the police were restricting travel, carrying out arbitrary arrests of workers, beatings, photographing, fingerprinting, telephone tapping. At the same time the bosses have used their courts and laws to cut off money and food to striking miners. Strike funds have been seized and the strike declared illegal. Shipments of food from workers abroad have been turned back at ports or destroyed. Thousands of miners have received savage sentences on the flimsiest of charges. The entire bourgeois media, press and television have been united in a chorus of hatred and lies against the miners in the name of democracy and freedom. In fact so-called "democratic freedoms" have been wiped out and the present society revealed for what it is, the dictatorship of the capitalist class over the workers. Break the Miners' Isolation in Workers Voice 85 (January 1985)

There are many, many, aspects we could go into and many already have. We could highlight how the so-called battle of Orgreave in the summer of 1984 was one of the biggest diversions from the real picketing of the power stations and steelworks at a time when the ruling class was itself beginning to doubt the wisdom of fighting on. We could show how the miners passed from passive picketing towards real class violence when faced with an obdurate and violent enemy. The defeat was not inevitable and there were times when the Tory Government's nerve was shaken (naturally when the pound and the stock market tumbled). We could also point to the incredible sense of community which the strike revealed. The Tories thought that by getting a lot of workers to buy their council houses they would trap them in the so-called "property-owning democracy" where paying the mortgage outweighs any tendency to militancy. It may have worked elsewhere but in mining villages the building societies did not dare foreclose on mortgage arrears whilst the strike was on. This apparently made Thatcher incandescent with rage as she had already pronounced

that there was “no such thing as society”. She certainly destroyed the mining communities in pursuit of that piece of dogma.

The Lessons

But what the miners strike really showed was that militancy alone is not enough to win a battle on this scale. For the British bourgeoisie restructuring the old state-owned industries was absolutely vital but to achieve it they had to impose the most draconian of cuts on the bulk of the working class. The issue was never about modernising Britain – it was always about exploitation. And the evidence of their victory is all too apparent. Today families are more likely to exist on two low paid jobs (where they have them) rather than on one wage which can support all. Real wage rates have fallen continuously since 1973 whilst the ruling class have transferred industrial production to areas across the globe where they can exploit workers on minimal wages. They have been able to use the profits to indulge in the financial speculation which artificially gave the idea that real growth in the economy has taken place over the last two decades. At the same time they have tried to reduce the working class in Britain and all the advanced capitalist countries to the status of plebians, given enough bread (social security) and circuses to maintain them as consumers of the commodities produced by the quasi-slave labour of

the “emerging nations”. The speculative bubble has now ended in tears and once again as in the 1970s and 1980s the working class will be asked to pay for it. Where we go from here depends on the response of the working class everywhere. So far we have seen violent resistance in China and Korea and workers occupying factories and kidnapping managers in the advanced countries. However these are as yet not the stuff of a generalised class movement.

The miners' strike proved for all time that our collective resistance is not just economic and social but has also to be political. We can put it whichever way round you like. There was not enough consciousness so there was no workers' party or there was no workers' party so there was insufficient awareness of the stakes to play for. At the time of the miners' strike the workers were not really conscious that what they were fighting for was a bigger stake than just the survival of one industry. They had little realisation that they themselves would have to forge a new society. And this is why there was no political party of the working class which had an alternative vision of the society we need. Politically the capitalists understood what was at stake in 1984–5 and this is what we have to understand now. Whilst our daily resistance to exploitation is the basis for the future of the unity of workers actions it won't be through a spontaneous outburst here or there

alone that we will achieve the understanding that we need a programme which envisages a different kind of society.

It is likely that the current crisis will be managed by the state so that we are in for a gradual worsening of living conditions world wide. In this period communists need to explain that the only future this system has to offer is one of permanent wars, declining living standards for the majority and environmental degradation to the point where the existence of humanity is threatened. This means we have to help develop the consciousness of the working class to an awareness that it alone, as the one collectively exploited producing class, has the capacity to solve humanity's problems. This means going beyond struggles in this or that workplace, and to raise our sights for the struggle for a society based on human needs and not capitalist profits. We can still do it – but only if we learn the lessons of our own history.

Jock

Footnote

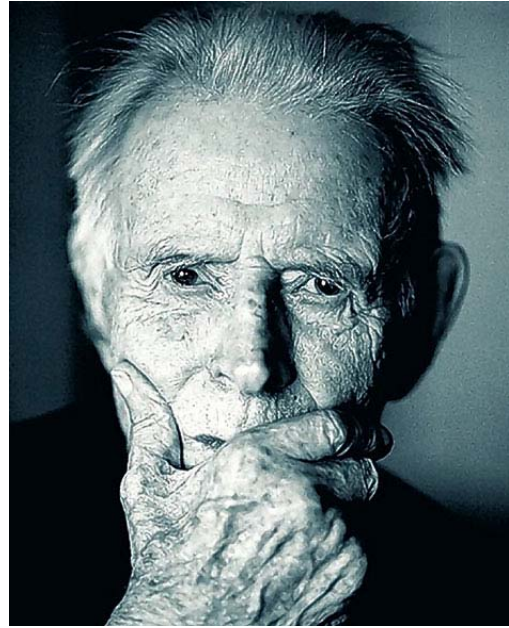
1 The phrase is from the Russian Interior Minister Plehve who suggested to the Tsar of Russia in 1904 when faced with mass strikes that what he needed was a “short victorious war” to play the nationalist card. Unfortunately for “Nicholas the Bloody” Russia chose to fight a newly emerging Japan and lost thus provoking the 1905 War. The British Government had no such problems when faced with the decrepit dictatorship in Argentina (which was duly overthrown after the war).

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Harry Patch

The “Last Fighting Tommy” Has Died But Warmongering Lives On



Harry Patch died on Saturday 25 July 2009, only three days short of the ninety fifth anniversary of the start of the First World War¹. Just surviving the trenches and living to the age of 111 is remarkable enough, but as many people know his uniqueness does not stop there. The war for this particular Tommy was over on 22 September 1917. His group of four operating a Lewis gun were taking part in the third battle for Ypres (also known as Passchendaele). In an interview Harry described what happened

My own team was hit at Pilkem Ridge. A shell came over us and three of the boys were blown to pieces. Nothing of them was found — not a shred. I was lucky. I was only wounded.

“Only wounded” meant a piece of shrapnel two inches long and half an inch wide lodged in his groin. With Harry’s consent the field hospital doctor removed it without anaesthetic whilst four men held him down. He declined the offer of the shrapnel as a souvenir. It was a day he was never to forget even though he did not speak about until he was 100. And when he did speak it was to condemn the war and those who sent them to fight in it.

I was taken back to England to convalesce. When the war ended, I don’t know if I was more relieved that we’d won or that I didn’t have to go back. Passchendaele was a disastrous battle — thousands and thousands of young lives were lost. It makes me angry. Earlier this year, I went back to Ypres to shake the hand of Herr Kuentz,

Germany’s only surviving veteran from the war. It was emotional. He is 107. We’ve had 87 years to think what war is. To me, it’s a licence to go out and murder. Why should the British government call me up and take me out to a battlefield to shoot a man I never knew, whose language I couldn’t speak? All those lives lost for a war finished over a table. Now what is the sense in that?

(from an interview in the *Sunday Times* 7 November 2004)

The Hypocrisy of the Ruling Class

Harry’s anti-war sentiments are not in doubt. For him the Great War was “a licence to go out and murder”. But what predictable barefaced lies have followed this remarkable man’s death! Prince Charles intoned the most despicable line of all on Radio 4 saying that Harry and men like him had died “to defend the liberties we now enjoy”. Harry and his mates certainly fought for HRH’s “liberty” to rule over us. A glance at most war memorials will confirm that they did not go to fight for liberty but for “King and Country”. The King at the time was George V, the great-grandfather of Charles Windsor. These property owners really can say they are fighting for “my country” since they actually own it. For the rest of us nationalism is an abstraction dreamed up by the bourgeoisie to get workers to kill each other. In reality what Harry was sent to fight for was British imperial interests against the no less obnoxious German imperialist interests. The German imperialists wanted a free hand to dominate

Europe and built a navy with the idea of forcing the British to agree to this. The British reaction was the opposite, seeking allies amongst former sworn enemies like France (agreeing on the division of Africa) and Russia (creating buffer zones in Central Asia). Britain went to war in 1914 not to defend “brave little Belgium”² but to make sure that the German Navy was destroyed and no longer posing a potential threat to the shipping lanes of the British Empire. This is why the British Government demanded the immediate surrender of the German Fleet in November 1918 and ordered it to Scapa Flow.

We should not forget that at the same time they also maintained a blockade of the starving German people until the end of June 1919. No great humanitarian cause here. And the majority of the Labour Party and the trades unions joined with the toffs, the capitalists and aristocrats, in defending their property. No surprise that Gordon Brown should echo the nationalist claptrap of our future King. Here’s a selection of his vomit making rhetoric.

I know that the whole nation will unite today to honour the memory, and to take pride in the generation that fought the Great War.

The noblest of all the generations has left us, but they will never be forgotten.

We say today with still greater force: ‘We will remember them’.

I think it’s right that we as a nation have a national memorial service to remember the sacrifice and all the work that was done by those people who served our

country during World War One and to remember what we owe to that generation - our freedom, our liberties, the fact that we are a democracy in the world.

Contrast this garbage with Harry's own view. In his memoir *The Last Fighting Tommy* written (with the aid of Richard van Emden) in 2007

Politicians who took us to war should have been given the guns and told to settle their differences themselves, instead of organising nothing better than legalised mass murder.

And even when Harry, at over 100 was dragged into the Armistice Day celebrations which he deplored, he did not indulge in the usual nationalist nonsense. Once giving a speech at the Menin Gate war memorial he stated

Let us remember our brethren who fell - on both sides of the line.

Harry Patch's funeral on August 6th (did anyone notice it was also the 64th anniversary of the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima?) was a further occasion for downright lies. *The Scotsman* reported that Harry Patch "would accept the need for war". The words were taken from the Head of the Army Sir Richard Dannatt, who reportedly said that Harry Patch's death was the end of "a chapter of living history", adding the brazen lie that Harry would have "accepted the need for conflict in Afghanistan". This violation of the facts of Harry's well known opinions is not surprising. It is the same big lie, so vividly underlined by Wilfred Owen at the end of his poem, *Dulce et decorum est* written during the Battle for Passchendaele,

*If you could hear, at every jolt,
the blood
Come gargling from the froth-
corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the
cud
Of vile, incurable sores on
innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with
such high zest
To children ardent for some
desperate glory,
The old Lie;
Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.³*

Harry had refused a state and a military funeral but that did not stop the military muscling in to provide the pallbearers (with German, Belgian and French military following to partially comply with Harry's wishes that the funeral should be about "peace and reconciliation").

Opposing War

We don't want to commit the same crimes as our rulers. We cannot claim Harry as one of us. Harry was not political but simply an ordinary working man, the plumber from Coombe Down. He was the antidote to any notion of making heroes, once stating for the TV cameras that

If any man tells you that he went into the front line and he wasn't scared, he's a liar.

He wanted to avoid the war but it wouldn't let him. Unlike Henry Allingham who died a few days before him he did not respond to Kitchener's call. When the first wave of volunteers looking for a bit of adventure were wiped out in battles like the Somme, the British ruling class were faced with the unpleasant prospect of introducing conscription. Being an island nation conscription was not normally essential to territorial defence, and arming the "scum of the earth", as Wellington called his own troops on the eve of Waterloo, was not something our rulers liked to do. After all, workers with guns can be dangerous (and this, plus the cost of building the Bomb, was the main reason why the British Empire took the decision to abandon National Service in 1955 - after all "a nuclear deterrent" means

which took place on the battlefields of Europe in the First World War. Much has been written (and filmed) in the last two decades about the Christmas truce of 1914 but this was only the start of the recognition that the war had nothing to do with those who were doing the dying. Writing at the time in his diary a British officer Captain J. L. Jack wrote of the fraternisation of Christmas 1914:

These incidents seem to suggest that, except in the temper of battle or of some great grievance, educated men have no desire to kill one another, and that were it not for aggressive National Polices, or the fear of them by others, war between civilized peoples would seldom take place.⁵

Harry Patch, like so many other Tommies would be surprised to be included in the ranks of the educated, but there is no doubt that he was not alone. But there was another strain of resistance to war which ultimately ended it. These begin with the tacit agreements of soldiers on both sides not to kill each other along wide stretches of the trenches. Tony Ashworth in his book *Trench Warfare 1914-18: The Live and Let Live System* stated that

Truces were usually tacit, but always unofficial and illicit. The agreements between antagonists



The Last Lie?: The State gets the militarist image it wanted as soldiers carry Harry Patch's coffin from Wells Cathedral

you don't need to worry the citizenry about what their destruction involves).

Harry was conscripted in 1916 and very soon found that the war was hell. After a while his team operating the Lewis machine gun⁴ made the decision not to shoot at heads and torsos but tried to aim below the knee. This decision was just one of the many minor (and not so minor) acts of sabotage of the "war effort"

was unspoken and expressed in certain actions - or non-actions - which were meaningful to front line fighters but not always to others.⁶

To give just a couple of eyewitness examples from the same source. A soldier wrote

We go out at night in front of the trenches the German working parties are also out so its not

considered etiquette to fire ...

And a British officer explained:

I was having tea with A company when we heard a lot of shouting and went to investigate. We found our men and the Germans standing on their respective parapets. Suddenly a salvo arrived but did no damage. Naturally both sides got down and our men started swearing at the Germans, when all at once a brave German got onto his parapet and shouted out 'We are very sorry about that; we hope no one was hurt. It is not our fault, it is that damned Prussian artillery.

There are thousands more examples of this "live and let live" attitude but resistance did not end their. As the futility of the war struck home in 1917 desertion and even full scale mutiny became more common.

Class War is the only Way to Stop Imperialist War

One such occurred at the brutal British embarkation base of Étaples just 12 days before Harry's mates were killed. This was largely in response to the brutal conditions imposed on troops in a supposed attempt to toughen them up before sending them to the front. Run by training officers with yellow armbands known as "Canaries", the reputation of the place was well established by 1917. It took only one incident (in this instance the shooting of a soldier by a military policeman for refusing to stop talking to a female auxiliary) and the whole place went wild. British troops refused to obey orders for days and order was only restored when offers to increase pay and remove the worst abuses were agreed by a panicking General Staff.⁷

The Étaples Mutiny though did not manifest much anti-war consciousness and such class consciousness as was seen was more intuitive than political. Whilst the British Army largely went in for desertion (thousands of British, French, German and Belgian troops lived in hidden communities in the woods of the Somme or the limestone cliffs near Le Touquet) the real mutinies took place in the French Army and in the Russian Army fighting on the Western Front. The French Army had mutinied first in April 1917 after the disastrous Nivelle Offensive on the Aisne. At the height of the battle troops coming down the line had baa-ed at troops coming up to signify that they were all lambs to the slaughter. The first to mutiny were some of the French

Army's own colonial troops who refused to go into the trenches. Some were shot but the rebellion spread right along the front to involve 78 regiments. Two regiments singing the Internationale and waving red flags set out for the capital but were ambushed by cavalry troops and forced to return to the front to face either the firing squad or the Germans. Pétain, the most trusted of the French generals, was despatched to promise that there would be better conditions and no more suicidal offensives as long as the men held the line. This was accepted by the troops but Pétain later had 70 of their most prominent leaders shot. On 9 September 1917, just before Passchendaele, it was the turn of the Russians in France to try to end the war. Having gone to war in a wave of patriotic fervour these troops were now supporters of the revolutionary movement which had broken out in their country of origin.

Ten thousand troops of France's Russian allies, serving in Champagne had overthrown their officers, set up soviets and declared a Bolshevik revolution (two months before the real one - CWO). Now they were surrounded by French cavalry, artillery and three brigades of infantry. Thousands of miles from home but buoyed up by propaganda from Trotsky and his friends in Paris, and the bewitching oratory of Private Globa, the Russians refused to surrender.⁸

The result was a battle a hundred miles behind the lines which lasted for three days. The outcome was never in doubt as the artillery just pummeled the Russians into surrender. These mutinies of 1917 may all have been failures but they indicated that many at the time were ready not only to put an end to "legalised murder" as Harry Patch called it, but the social system which provoked it. Indeed if it had not been for the Russian and German Revolutions the capitalists would not have ended the war even after four years of slaughter.

When many young men in all countries volunteered to fight in 1914 it was with the expectation that, "the war would be over by Christmas". After all, the cabinet wars of the previous 90 years had all been short, and for limited objectives. But these wars were largely about establishing modern national states like Germany and Italy. They had precise and limited objectives. The wars of capitalist imperialism however have a much bigger goal which is to destroy the

productive capacity of the opposition entirely. The wars of the twentieth century have been much bloodier and nastier as a result. Even in the seemingly small war against the Boers in 1899–1901 the British introduced a total war concept which included, for the first time the introduction of concentration camps for an entire population, and which resulted in the massive loss of civilian life.

The First World War was a total war not just between armies but between economies and in the end it became a war of attrition which was won by the side whose population suffered the least. In 1917 the collapse of the Tsarist regime and the subsequent Bolshevik Revolution seemed to give Germany an advantage, but this was largely illusory. In fact by the beginning of 1918 the tide was turning. Geographically isolated by the Allied blockade the Central European population, like that in Russia earlier, was starving. A quarter of a million died of disease and malnutrition in Germany in the winter months and the same was happening to Germany's ally in Austria. All this was a far cry from the situation in 1914 when the Social Democratic Party, betraying every resolution against war voted by the Second International decided to vote war credits for the Kaiser. This was probably the greatest single betrayal in the history of the working class and threw the revolutionaries inside Social Democracy in Germany and elsewhere into despair. However once the war's real character was demonstrated resistance began. Leaflets appeared before the end of 1914 which condemned the leadership of the Social Democratic Party and Karl Liebknecht became the first SDP MP to vote against further war funds thus earning a prison sentence. One of the leaflets added a new line of parody to the socialist march "Arise socialists, close your ranks!"

*You who in your millions
Come from mines and fields,
from cities and the land
You are now mere cannon fodder
Cannon built by proletarian
hands!
For now we fire on our kin with
pleasure
For this is what our highest
masters wish,
To wipe out the greatest score of
human lives
This is the goal to which we are
led,
This is what is known as "holy
war".
With us, the people! Victory is
assured.⁹*

By early 1918 strikes were

developing all over Germany and anti-war sentiment was growing. In March 1918 the German General Staff gambled all on a final offensive in the West known to them as "Operation Michael" but to history by the name of the General who was virtually dictator of Germany by this time. Once the final gamble of the Ludendorff Offensive petered out in July 1918 the German General Staff told the Kaiser the war could not be won, and urged him to get civilian figureheads into Government to be more credible negotiators for peace. But before that process was finished the naval mutinies in Kiel and Wilhelmshaven spread to the Northern German cities and turned into a revolution. The Kaiser fled and the task of halting the revolution fell to the same German Social Democratic Party which had betrayed the workers in 1914. Once again they did not disappoint their allies amongst the capitalists and the military. Once the Spartakist Revolt was defeated in January 1919 they dismantled the workers councils set up in November 1918. These class struggles were all part of a revolutionary wave which had its echoes everywhere. Even in Britain five and half million days were lost to strikes in 1917. When the workers, appalled at the capitalists' continuing life of luxury whilst they starved, proposed to take over the distribution of food in 1918 the Government hastily introduced rationing to stave off a first step towards revolution.

All this only underlines our point that wars are fought for capitalist (and in

this epoch it means imperialist) interests. They have nothing to do with the mass of the population. They will be ended, not by the United Nations, nor by pacifist campaigns, but only by the international revolution of the working class everywhere. Harry Patch was no revolutionary but he clearly perceived that the First World War was fought for the interests of the few and for this we salute him. What he did not see is that in order to put an end to war we need to change society. This is why we have advocated class war as the only way to put an end to imperialist war. Some have rebuked us for using the word "war" but we are not advocating something which does not already exist. The lies of Prince Charles, General Dannatt and Gordon Brown are all part of the ideological face of this class war. And in a real sense we are the ones who will pay for every capitalist crisis of war and peace, just as we are doing now. We do not advocate violence as such but we cannot see the property owners who are prepared to plunge mankind into misery to defend their property rights giving it away without some sort of fight. How violent that fight is will depend on the preparation of the world working class. The more conscious, organised and united it is, the more power it will have to brush aside our masters. After all, as the German revolutionary song above says, we produce both the wealth and the means of repression which are used against us. The more we use our collective strength the more peaceful will be our eventual triumph. Only by ushering in a new society based on

human need, a society without standing armies, national frontiers and class rule, can we abolish these futile wars for the interests of the few. And that would be a fitting monument to the men and women of Harry Patch's generation.

Jock

Footnotes

- 1 The forces of the Austro-Hungarian Army marched into Serbia on 28 July 1914, exactly one month to the day since the heir apparent to the Imperial title, Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated by a Serbian nationalist group in Bosnia, with the aid of Serbian military intelligence. The subsequent ultimatum to Serbia was simply a delayed declaration of war. Within a week all the Great Powers piled into the conflict (with the exception of Italy which waited until it got the best offer from either side and thus did not enter the conflict until May 1915).
- 2 The Ypres Salient was the only bit of Belgium the German Army did not conquer in 1914. It was held simply for that reason. Militarily it made no sense to hold it. It was dominated by a ridge which ran through the village of Passchendaele from where the German artillery were able to pour down a murderous fire on the Allied troops below. This explains why there were three bloody battles as the Allies (British, French and Belgian Armies) fought to hold on to it and take the ridge. There were nearly 200,000 deaths on both sides in the battle where Harry lost his mates.
- 3 Owen took this from a Latin ode by the Roman poet Horace and means "How sweet and fitting it is to die for your country".
- 4 One reason for Harry's survival was that he was, like the grandfather of the author this article, a Lewis machine gunner and thus expected to do most of the killing. My own grandfather joined the Army in 1912 as a boy soldier (aged 15) and left it without a scratch in 1920. The greatest danger facing Lewis gunners was that they were targeted by the (not very accurate) artillery which explains the horrible end of Harry's comrades on September 22nd, 1917.
- 5 Quoted in *Meeting in No Man's Land* M. Brown (ed) Constable 2007
- 6 *Op cit.* Macmillan 1980 p.19
- 7 For a fuller account see *The Monocled Mutineer* by William Allison and John Fairley, Quartet 1978
- 8 *Op cit* p.57
- 9 Quoted in Brown et al. *op. cit* p.203

AURORA

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On the Iranian Election

The Working Class Must Fight for its Own Agenda



In our previous article¹ we tried to explain how the two main factions of the Iranian ruling class had arrived at the election, how the Iran/Iraq war had rejuvenated the “soul of capital”, and how reformism had dispersed the growing struggle of the working class. We also showed how US and EU policies, such as the war on terror and on the nuclear issue benefited the Islamic Republic nationally and internationally. Here we look at these issues in a bit more detail.

The War is Over, the Commanders Return

In May 1979, just a month after proclaiming the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, ordered the Revolutionary Council to form *Sepâh e Pâsdârân e Enqelâb e Eslâmi*, the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, or IRG.

Eight years of organising a war machine by renewing state arms manufacturing, dealing in international black markets, and acting as a powerful “client” of the major domestic industries and the bazaar, led to the metamorphosis of these “revolutionaries” of the IRG into a wealthy new elite that would have no match, as far as corruption was concerned. They were headed by Rafsanjani who from 1989 to 1997 was President during Iran’s post-war re-construction period.

Rafsanjani knew that, when they returned home, the “heroes” who had carried out the “Sacred Defence” of the nation would have problems with the lavish lifestyle that he and his clique were enjoying, unless they were given a share. So he found a way, “legally” of course, to pass an act of parliament to engage them in the “business” of post-war re-construction.

However, little did Rafsanjani realise how quickly these “heroes” would forget about “emancipation”, “Islamic brotherhood” and “heaven”, once the dollar’s magic was waved in front of their hungry eyes! And less did he realise how soon they would challenge his authority and his well known “Oil Mafia” establishment. During this period, however, the IRG elite and personnel were out of political power.

From 1997–2005, while Khatami enjoyed popularity by promoting “civil society” and a “dialogue of civilizations” the IRG began its political ascendancy, by allying itself with the conservatives to challenge Khatami’s reforms. Thus their influence grew rapidly, so that they had a finger in every pie. As well as becoming the most powerful economic body in the country, the IRG also managed to impose some of its commanders as head of a few powerful Bonyads; foundations, that the Islamic Republic had confiscated from the previous regime of the Shah. As well as this there was the Foundation of the Oppressed; Bonyad Mostazafan whose activities cover 3 categories, Economic, Scientific and Cultural & Social; the economic section covering 42 major companies, which according to some analysts are the biggest in the Middle East. They also controlled Astan Quds Razavi’s activities in mining and manufacturing, agriculture, construction & civil engineering as well as activities in the Free Economic Zone of Sarakhs. In addition the IRG also managed to gain control, directly and indirectly, of some other foundations, including the Alavi Foundation, the Martyrs Foundation, the Pilgrimage Foundation, the Housing Foundation, the Foundation for War Refugees, and the Foundation for Imam Khomeini’s Publications.

All that was left was to grab the last political bastion of reformism, the presidency. To flex their muscles and to show how far they would go, they fired their first warning shot, on 8 May 2004 when:

Revolutionary Guards, citing security concerns, blocked the runway at Tehran’s new Imam Khomeini International Airport.

The guards used military vehicles to block the runway, after just one of six scheduled flights had landed at the airport on its first day of operation. Due to the closure, a second inbound flight from Dubai was forced to divert to the central Iranian city of Isfahan more than 155 miles away despite being low on fuel.

Airline Industry Information, 12 May 2004

The 2005 election showed the determination of the Khomeini and IRG camp to oust the reformists from political power. The next few years revealed that neither the conservative camp nor the reformist camp were homogeneous. Where the interests of the IRG, Bonyads and the bazaar overlapped, there was a united policy against reformists but where there was a conflict of interest different factions flexed their muscles as on 13 October 2008. According to

Agence France Presse

The Iranian capital’s traditional bazaar stayed on strike on Sunday as merchants pressed their demand that a decision to bring in VAT be scrapped, even after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad officially froze its implementation for two months. Stalls were shut down in the capital’s main bazaar.

Death to America! Long Live the Enemy!

If someone had told Khomeini what Gorbachev said to Reagan, "*I am going to deprive you of an enemy*", Khomeini would have had a nightmare as he would have nothing to say in his Friday speech! State-managed shows would have nothing to say and would have no viewers. Iranian television would have to close down a few of its channels, including its English Press TV while leftists, like Galloway and Co, would have to look for a new cause.

A few years ago, a low ranking clergyman in the holy city of Qom, in an interview said "Clinton talks well but acts badly, Bush talks badly but acts well". This clergyman had understood the essence of the new US policy and how the Islamic Republic was going to fully exploit it. The four years of Ahmadinejad's presidency in the Bush period was a triumph, not because he was offering something good or new, but just because his opponents nationally and internationally were so bankrupt. They portrayed themselves as the 'ENEMY' he so desperately needed.

Hardly a month would pass without news like this in The Observer on 4 November 2007,

*Now is the time for clarity over Iran
The drums of war are beating. In America, talk of a strike against Iran grows louder. In Israel, hardliners claim Tehran is close to getting the bomb. In Bahrain, host to the US fifth fleet, the state's foreign minister imagines doomsday.*

Or take the nuclear issue; just a few months after Bush, Blair and Sarkozy questioned whether Iran, as one of the major oil producing countries, needed nuclear energy at all, American diplomats and Sarkozy were travelling around the region offering nuclear technology to other major oil producing countries! Contracts were signed with the U.A.E and Libya just a few months later whilst another with Egypt was on the way.

The University of Columbia's decision to host the Iranian leader at its World Leader's Forum in September 2007, was one of those events that captured world attention. Presumably it was arranged to challenge Ahmedinejad's controversial stand on the Holocaust? What challenge? This

man, with the most reactionary and superstitious ideas that can be found on earth was applauded several times. It seemed like he was almost winning the argument. This is an indictment of today's Western "liberalism" but how was all this seen by people in the region, including Iran? Is there any room for surprise at Ahmadinejad's partial popularity among the masses whose politics are anything but class politics?

Two Camps, One Illusion

Having succeeded in keeping the foreign "Enemy" alive and giving himself a "victorious" image inside the country, on domestic issues Ahmadinejad, picked up on



corruption. His regular trips and visits to poor towns and villages indicated where he intended to draw his support and where he would prioritise investment. He had all the qualities for spreading the illusion that he represented their interest and he would fight corruption. A simple man who sleeps on the floor, lives in a small house, doesn't wear suits etc. In public meetings and gatherings he even spoke of the "demise of capitalism"!

In 2007, as part of preparation for civil unrest the IRG merged with the Basij (militia) which was the final consolidation of the *Khomeini* and IRG camp, which was now well prepared and well in control of the economy. Similar exercises to the below reported one, were conducted in few major cities including Tehran up to the election day

The second round of Basij mobilisation exercises on urban counter insurgency begin on Tuesday, October 23, 2007. The first exercise will begin "with heavy and light weapons around the city of Qom". The Basij commander for government agencies and offices announced last Saturday that 10,000 Basij members belonging to government agencies would begin three-day exercises around the city of Qom "to confront the enemy, attack the enemy's defence systems and confront the possible infiltration of the enemy into sensitive centres."

Unlike the other faction, the reformists picked on individual "Rights" and "Rule of Law" issues. They kept defining and re-defining democracy and Islam! A few reformist parties started to criticise their own policy in previous elections by saying that they had gone too far in their attempts to expose corruption, in particular in relation to Rafsanjani and Co! This gave Rafsanjani more room to manoeuvre, so much so that he could now sneak into the reformist camp and put his weight behind his old opponent Moussavi, who stood a good chance of getting past the obstacle of the Guardian Council's vetting of candidates. The conservatives, confident of their success, did not see that Moussavi would be a challenge to Ahmadinejad.

Both camps went into the election without engaging the public to any great degree in their campaigns. It seemed that Ahmadinejad's supporters were under no illusion that corruption would end. Moussavi supporters were even less hopeful about more human rights. The experience of 4 years of Ahmadinejad who was supposed to "bring oil money to their table" and 8 years of Khatami which had basically given nothing, were pretty vivid in the minds of supporters of both camps.

Then came the television debates, the first ever in the Islamic Republic's history. Ahmadinejad, confident of his success and desperate for a landslide victory which would match that of Khatami's 1997 victory, attacked his opponents on a scale never seen before when he openly named Rafsanjani and Karrubi as an axis of corruption. His supporter began to believe it was a real challenge to corruption. In a similar

way, in the other camp, Moussavi's supporters saw this split as an opportunity to say NO to the Islamic Republic, by driving a wedge to widen the crack, so to speak, an equally unprecedented move.

Of course, supporters of both camps were not aware of the fact that by supporting this or that faction, they were splitting among themselves. In the early days when social restrictions were relaxed, supporters of both camps were on the streets discussing and dancing in a very friendly atmosphere, unaware of what this split would mean in the coming days.

And it came like a storm. Hundreds of thousands took to the street without any preparations, shocking themselves and shocking the world. So far, officially, 69 people are dead, hundreds injured and thousands arrested. Even though the street protest has massively reduced, the situation which provoked it has not been resolved. To sum up, this movement didn't come out of a clear blue sky, it is the outcome of the bourgeois factions attempt to outmanoeuvre the public on one hand, and an outburst against 30 years of absolute dictatorship and economic stagnation on the other. A close look at the nature of the protest reveals:

An Absolute Reactionary Leadership

There can be no doubt about the reactionary nature of the current leadership, not just because of their previous anti-working class and anti-revolutionary stand which is a matter of record, but also, and more important, on their current positions. A quick review of Moussavi' and Karubbi's statements since the beginning of the protest reveals how they have sacrificed the lives of the protesters in order to save this rotten Republic. Two months on, despite all the sacrifices by the protesters, they have not managed to get a single concession from the "Supreme Leader" to whom they keep pleading for mercy. Symbolically, the reformist pundits are telling Khomeini to avoid the Shah's mistake and urge him to listen to the voice of "Revolution"! But how could he possibly listen to something that is not there? The latest Rafsanjani manoeuvres give an indication of how far this devious politician can go. The anti-working class policies which have been adopted up to now may prove to be insignificant to compare with those that will be implemented in the coming days and weeks. They will work around the idea of an outside

"ENEMY" to divert attention and foster national "unity"

A Weak "Velvet Revolution" Tendency

Here some might criticise us for saying the same as the Revolutionary Guards. But we are not, and radical elements among the protesters should not close their eyes to the fact



A supporter of Moussavi fighting the Basiji (militia)

that the idea of a "velvet revolution" exists within the movement. Whether this idea is simply copied by young inexperienced middle class protesters or initiated by those who engineered the election, or by monarchists, makes no difference in so far as the damage that it has already done or will do in the coming period. This idea is mostly attractive among ex-Shah supporters and stems from an illusion that has been spread by the west in ex-soviet countries. Pick up a colour, chant a few silly slogans, then democracy will arrive, like it did in Ukraine and Georgia! Pick up a green colour, clever choice (an Islamic colour!) and chant "Ahmadi bye bye, Ahmadi bye bye..... One Week, Two Weeks, Mahmoud hasn't taken a bath, then democracy inshallah will arrive!" This is not to say that the movement does not have radical elements.

The Presence of Substantial Radical Elements:

This reflects the general discontent. These protesters considered the situation as an opportunity to break the harsh oppressive atmosphere that their previous attempts had come up against.

These radical elements include women, teachers and workers. They have existed for the last few years and have been subject to mass

arrests (especially in 2007). It is also, to a lesser degree, a hangover from the student movement of the Khatami period, as well as elements from ethnic minority movements, as in Kurdistan and Zahedan. The backbone of the street protests is rooted in these elements. Its policy towards the election was articulated in a statement called "Election & Dialogue" by the Demand Axis which was circulated on 15 March 2009 and

was signed by nearly 500 individuals. These individuals included women, students, journalists, civil right activists, workers, ethnic minorities ... even clergymen and ex-reformist parliamentarians. Their statement sums up the current dire economic situation and experience of the last two elections by stating:

Notwithstanding:

*1, The economic pressure resulting from inflation, and economic stagnation, and also the restriction on freedom and human rights particularly in recent years and the ever increasing pressure on political activists, women, students, journalists, civil rights activists, workers, ethnic minorities, followers of other religions,.....and also because of the costly, quarrelsome, non-transparent conduct of the government, we believe that the **national interest** is in danger*
*2, At present this is due to the government's **lack of transparency** and its failure to deal with problems. As a condition for a **free, healthy and just election** does not exist and the chance of getting demands met is very remote and also due to the intervention of irresponsible bodies that are not supposed to interfere in the political process, we have a*

serious reservations about the way the election is going to be conducted
(our emphases)

Here we do not intend to discuss the nature of the demands since the events itself revealed their irrelevance however we would like to say a few words on the general policies outlined.

The first and by far the most important issue is class interest. Workers cannot and should not replace their class interest with that of the national interest. The whole concept of the national interest is based on the illusion that the interests of the rulers (or would-be rulers) can be reconciled with the interests of the exploited class. There is no short cut, as we said in our article "Thirty Years of Islamic Iran – A Warning from History" (see *Revolutionary Perspectives* 49 or <http://www.ibrp.org/en/articles/2009-04-15/thirty-years-of-islamic-iran-a-warning-from-history>)

The revolutionary programme has to be developed and fought for by an organisation which bases itself on the past lessons of the workers' struggles and is part of the class. This is the independent and international revolutionary workers' party. As the Iranian experience shows, such a party cannot be the product of the last minute but must be present inside the working class before the revolutionary situation arises. The Iranian working class have suffered much for the illusions and weaknesses of 1979, but they have at least one gain. The council idea has not been lost from Iranian workers' revolutionary consciousness as they have often been formed, if only as strike committees, in struggles since 1979. The next time, however, these strike committees must be transformed into real bodies representing a working class alternative and the next time they must be part of a world-wide struggle for communism.

The second, related, issue is the concern for "a free, fair and healthy election". We do not boycott elections because of a lack of freedom or a lack of transparency. Our opposition to elections is based on the recognition of the true nature of parliament in bourgeois society. Parliament is the executive committee of the ruling class. The representative approach (i.e. where MPs are elected but are not capable of being recalled) has never been for

the working class. It is a myth that the working class in Europe achieved some of its demands through voting and parliament. On the contrary it has been voting and parliament that have limited working class achievements in the last two centuries. Only bodies composed of elected delegates who can be immediately recalled by the workers can represent working class interests. But even this can only work in a society where production has been socialised and the media is not controlled by the propertied classes.

The Absence of the Working Class?

To say that the working class, as a class, was absent in this protest is an obvious statement, but to conclude that workers did not participate at all is a wrong assumption.

Prior to the election, unrest among the working class was much in evidence. Unemployment amongst 15–29 years olds stands at 31%. The Iranian Government also sets wage levels for most industries. In March 2007 the monthly minimum wage was reduced from about \$450 "to prevent layoffs" to \$200. The official poverty line is \$300 a month. Nearly 2 million Iranian workers have arrears of pay going back months. Strikes and other actions by workers, such as in the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, Irankhodro, and the Haft Tapeh sugar factory (which has had 17 strikes in three years) are just a few examples of many which met with a brutal police response that led to many being arrested and jailed. The two statements below are examples of how workers regarded the election. These, and similar ones, give an indication of how advanced at least some workers are in rejecting the election as a bourgeois tool. At the same time this indicates the long road ahead which we need to go through to form independent organisations. It is worth reminding ourselves that these statements are written and spoken in a situation where tens of worker activists have been jailed for just attempting to form an independent organization, or participating in a May Day rally or merely having an interview with foreign journalists.

In a statement which was signed by a collection of Irankhodro's workers we read:

*We want neither the best nor the worst, we just want a better world...
... the experience of last few years has proved that all elections are either for*

maintaining the status quo or to improve it for the ruling class. A government that takes pride in implementing Clause 44 of the Constitution, concerned with privatisation ... will never take a step towards meeting workers needs ... was it not the Commander of Development's (i.e. Rafsanjani's - CWO) government that shamefully implemented the temporary contract, ... on this basis we Irankhodro workers, by considering the current situation, will not participate in the election where we have no right of choice and we are not free and we do not have a worker's organisation. We will only participate in election where it protects our interests.

and also on 3 June 2009, in an interview with Radio Farda, Reza Shahabi, a member of the executive committee of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company union, when asked about the workers' position in the coming election, replied:

We do not have any specific opinion on this election and we will tell no one either to participate or not to. Previous Presidents never kept their promises. Until now none of the candidates has said anything about the workers. We can only



Striking bus workers mass meeting

meet our demands by relying on ourselves, the workers movement and independent workers organisations. We will pursue our demands only through our unions.²

Following the recent street protests, further statements by Irankhodro workers announced a half hour strike in every shift and a Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company union statement³ supporting the protest and condemning police brutality shows how much the popular movement is drawing in the workers movement.

The Unity of the Working class

This underlines the biggest danger that militant workers are facing regarding this particular movement. The fact is that the workers whilst trying to stay on an independent class terrain have been split into two camps. Every policy that we adopt and every single step that we take should bear this in mind. The working class' biggest asset is its unity, without this unity even its best policies are doomed. In the coming days workers should organize themselves against both the Ahmedinejad and Moussavi camp. The split among the ruling class has provided a breathing space for the working class to form its own independent organizations against Iranian capitalism, a system that has nothing new to offer.

Militant Workers!

The task before us is not an easy task, the spectre of so many years of failures is haunting us, and the traps along the path that we intend to go are many. The brutality of the capitalist state has no limit, but equally dangerous are all these elements pushing us to be "realistic" and limit our aim to "the achievable". The bourgeois pundits echo this by presenting historical events upside down. They are encouraging us to limit our goal within the capitalist system. We have heard them all before. Democracy, Freedom, Peace, Security, Full Employment, Muslim Brotherhood..... and we have lived long enough to witness and experience what they meant in reality; just full blown barbarism. War, unemployment, economic insecurity, and oppression are now a permanent feature of capitalism.

The way that events have unfolded has made reformism irrelevant. The presence of tens of thousands on the streets is testimony to the revolutionary potential of the masses. The protests are no longer about the election nor about reforming the system. They are the manifestation of the failure of reformism. **Reform is dead, Long Live Revolution.** But the only class which is capable of leading a real revolution is the working class and this throws an enormous responsibility on its shoulders.

Comrades!

The official state media in Iran, is repeating the idea that this movement is initiated by the foreign powers. We do not intend to prove the stupidity of this argument nor

would we try to downplay the foreign power's meddling in it either. After all, Imperialist rivalry, big or small, does not take place in a vacuum. Contrary to their accusations and denials, and also contrary to middle class multicultural notions of "diversity", "their culture", "our culture" and all that nonsense, the Internationalist Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that they do not recognize the legitimacy of national boundaries and will intervene and support workers struggles wherever they may be.

All the official propaganda about foreign interference is designed to isolate the working class struggle in order to make them to unite with their own bourgeoisie. The interests of the Iranian working class are entangled with those of Iraqi, American, British workers..... and in short, with the interests of the working class all over the world.

Similarly the "greens" of the Moussavi camp are trying to rekindle the ghost of the past by taking up the methods and slogans of 1979. People going to rooftops shouting "God is Great" (Allah O Akbar) as in 1979 or "Death to the Dictator" (instead of "Death to the Shah") are constantly trying to convince everyone that this simply a popular movement to reform the Islamic Republic. It reminds us of Marx's famous statement that

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language...

In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

However we have **learned a new language**, its is a class language in which every single working class protester is a reporter, a camera man..... we just need to move on and **forget the native language, the**

language of populism. We should organize our news bulletins, demonstrations announcements, and strike committees etc without relaying on the official channels. It absolutely must be based on independent grounds. The new technology, mobile, the Internet..... have provided us with an opportunity to use them for our advancement. Mosques or the official media are no longer the hub for organizing.

Behind the scene, among the rival factions, tense negotiations are taking place at national and international levels. Whatever the outcome of these negotiations might be, one thing is certain, all factions, soon or later, will unite against the working class. We should avoid dissolving into the current movement by taking part on individual basis. Instead we should organise ourselves in strike committees, workers assemblies etc. We should form committees of delegates (Soviets – Shuras) rather than on a representative bases (as in Parliament). All decisions should be made collectively and should leave room and means for correcting them if necessary. In short, however events develop, we should come out of this movement, more organised, more united and stronger, with the perspective of forming our independent organisations and developing our own programme, based on the experience of workers everywhere

In the coming days imperialist rivalry will raise many more issues that will demand the intervention of internationalists. We in the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party intend to rise to this challenge. Join with us!

Nationalism is dead, Long live Internationalism.

We will have to go for something that did not exist before, **Long Live Communism**

Damoon Saadati

Footnotes

1 See <http://www.ibrp.org/en/articles/2009-06-23/the-10th-iranian-presidential-elections-2009>

2 We have not dealt with the complicated issue of the role of Iranian trades unions in this text but this will be discussed in our next article.

3 "We the workers of Iran Khodro, Thursday 28/3/88 in each working shift will stop working for half an hour to protest at the suppression of students, workers, women, and the Constitution and declare our solidarity with the movement of the people of Iran. The morning and afternoon shifts from 10 to 10:30. The night shift from 3 to 3:30".

For more on the struggle of Tehran bus workers see *Tehran Transport Workers Gaoled in Revolutionary Perspectives* 38.

Power – the Fundamental Question of the State in Capitalist Society

At the heart of the many vexed questions which divide the working class groping towards a comprehension of the conditions it faces, and the many political expressions which vie for influence and leadership of the class struggle, is the analysis of political power both under capitalism and beyond. The clarity achieved by the leading theoretical founders of the communist movement, Marx and Engels still remains as the only basis upon which to examine this topic and can be summed up in almost a word by Marx "...the state is an instrument for the suppression of the working class nothing else!" As in so many areas, the bright light cast by Marx and Engels proved far too much of a scandalous truth for generations of mealy mouthed reformists and revolutionaries in name only who were unable to grasp the sharply accurate sentence cast by authentic revolutionaries upon the capitalist State and only succeeded in providing further layers of confusion and mystification to cover up the blatantly anti-working class nature of

power in capitalist society. It is quite remarkable that the original 19th century judgements of Marx and Engels have stood the test of time and correspond directly to our own crisis-racked historical moment.

Saving Marxism from the Leftists

On the many occasions that the problem of the capitalist State and the process of revolution were considered by Marx and Engels, the conclusion remained the same. The capitalist state was (and is) an instrument of class oppression, not a neutral body which could be used by the working class to implement a new social formation; "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes". In a letter to Kugelman, for example, Marx writes,

If you look at the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire, you will find that I declare that the next attempt of the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to the other, but to smash it and this is the preliminary precondition for every real people's revolution.

However for those of us who have explored the political spectrum in search of an organisational home in which to contribute to capitalism's demise, it is quite obvious that the Marxist perspective has been largely abandoned by the plethora of parties, groups, tendencies and organisations claiming to stand in the socialist tradition. Again and again we are presented with rehashes of electoral parties and alliances who apparently aim to nationalise the most important sectors of the economy, take over the banks etcetera, endlessly reproducing

many old and antiquated notions that have been fished out of the dustbin of history — unscientific and utopian ideas that were long ago answered by Marx, Engels and Lenin, ideas that belong to the prehistory of the workers' movement. These old and tired ideas of pre-Marxian, utopian socialism have been dusted down and presented as 21st Century Socialism. And there are even some simple souls who take this seriously.¹

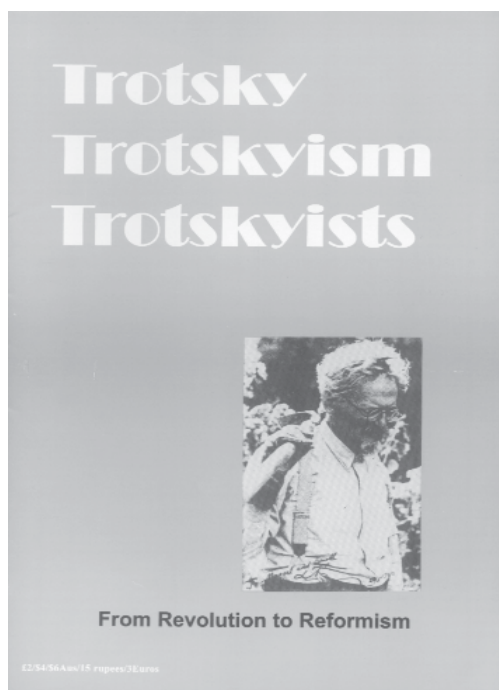
As well as variants on the theme of voting in this or that party to liquidate capitalism through parliament we also find the old theme of voting in the Social Democratic/Labour parties and applying working class pressure upon it to apply socialist measures. Apparently radical revolutionary outfits can quote chapter and verse of Marx, yet still conclude that electing Labour to a parliamentary majority is a viable solution

We have not yet convinced you of the need for revolution? Very well. Let us at least agree that we have to fight against the bosses and their government. Let us by all means fight together for the election of a Labour government. But that is not enough. A Labour government must carry out policies in the interests of the working class. How can they do that, when the banks and monopolies are in the hands of our enemies? "How do we deal with that? Once elected, Labour must take emergency action to solve unemployment, homelessness and all the other problems. They must immediately pass an Enabling Act to nationalise the banks and monopolies."²

Under Capitalism Economic Power is Political Power

If the arguments in favour of parliamentary democracy wrapped in pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric hardly manage to seduce anyone, revolutionaries must also remember

Our pamphlet on Trotskyism is £2.50 from the group address



that historical materialism, our method of interpreting the unfolding reality can never be a simple restatement of the positions of the past, an invariant suspension of time which requires nothing more than presentation to the working class of the texts of the “old masters”. We must strive to demonstrate that the theoretical conquests made in the past are valid now, to enrich and elaborate them. When Lenin wrote “

Bourgeois democracy, although a great historical advance in comparison with mediaevalism, always remains...restricted, truncated, false and hypocritical and a snare and a deception for the exploited and the poor,

he could have been directly commenting about the resources made available to the parties whose ideological line directly favours the wealthy minorities who provide such resources. The figures released by the Electoral Commission show the millions of pounds donated by the wealthy and the trade unions whose bloated bureaucrats have every interest in maintaining an economic system which perpetuates their privilege at our expense. The *Financial Times* informs us that donations to all parties in the first three months of 2009 totalled over £9 million, with the Tories doing best of all with £4.3 million including ... a £1.1 million donation from Stanley Fink, often referred to as the “godfather” of the British hedge fund industry.³

What more blatant example of the Marxist view that the class which wields economic power also wields ideological domination? What does this say about the liberal arguments about the wonders of democracy, its impartiality and its fairness? “Money talks” is an old saying, and this is an excellent illustration of that fact. Not that any of this is totally new. The same FT article goes on to say that the previous quarter saw even greater donations to the Tory party of £5.1 million. The massive resources which the capitalist parties command ensure they have their hands on the reins of power. This is far more significant than the peccadilloes of MPs expenses dealt with in our last issue.⁴ The hollow illusion of democracy is yet another example of the primacy of economic power, the real source of power in this and every other historical class-divided social formation. Just as Marx described, the modern State is the present day instrument of class domination which grew out of absolute monarchy, not an impartial power standing outside of sordid material interests impartially

representing all citizens.

The centralized state power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature — organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labour — originates from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle class society as a mighty weapon in its struggle against feudalism. At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labour, the state power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organised for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism.⁵

The State is Not Neutral

Our analysis of the State has tremendous repercussions for our political positions in many areas and separates us from the left-wing of capital which, often presenting itself under the guise of the socialist label,



Public ownership does not at all do away with the capitalist relationship

poses no threat to the existence of capitalism. Rather it seeks to secure a permanent place within the system through a series of measures often involving state funding in order to procure social stability and the conditions for optimal profiteering. Unlike this so-called left and the Trade Unions which call on workers to support calls for nationalisation or to combat the spread of privatisation, to engage in electoral politics in order to propel those critical of the free market and private enterprise into power, we have no illusions that State control of productive forces is in any way advantageous to the

working class. Public sector workers are particularly targeted by this sort of propaganda. They are exhorted by the unions to identify with their exploiters “for the common good” and to stand up for public ownership. Workers are divided between public and private sector and the media stokes up antagonism between them, an obvious tactic to create cracks in the working class unity which the capitalist class fears. Public ownership is depicted as somehow opposing capitalism even when it involves greater levels of exploitation. All of this directly relates to the historical defeat of the workers’ movement whereby the industries taken into public ownership became the vehicle for the privileged position of State bureaucrats. Public ownership does not at all do away with the capitalist relationship. The fact that the right wing of capital contributes to this illusion by presenting enlarged state involvement in economic affairs as “socialist” further fuels this dangerous trap; workers can only suffer if they allow themselves to be involved in ruling class disputes about the extent of state run capitalism and market freedom. Neither direction contributes to working class freedom from wage labour, from its position of estrangement from the decision making process regarding production, in short from its slavery to the capitalist class which can derive its position of power by direct ownership of industry, or through the State bureaucracy.

We make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions. Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive.⁶

The class which dominates economically is able to dominate mentally, either through direct private ownership of the channels of communication, or by indirect ownership of the State’s tremendous arsenal of influence, parliament, education etc., through political parties reliant on the funding of those whose material conditions depend on the prolonged existence of capitalism. This is the obvious fact which negates any claim to legitimacy for capitalist democracy. Behind the illusion of pluralism and free competition between a multiplicity of political perspectives stands the unchallenged allegiance to the capitalist mode of production which all parliamentary parties must profess in order to receive the material support necessary to have an impact in the electoral process. Although no individual capitalist or sector has overall control, the

interests of the capitalist class as a whole are served. It is precisely our adherence to the Marxist analysis of the capitalist state which prevents us from endorsing any of its variants. The internal disputes of the ruling class over the management of the capitalist process, particularly how to tackle the effects of the current crisis, disagreements over the degree of interference in market mechanisms, immigration controls, taxation levels, welfare spending and the like, in no way represent a threat to the continued existence of the capitalist social relationship and cannot be used by the working class for its own advantage. When this or that capitalist political outfit presents its plans for greater State expenditure, regardless of dressing up its rhetoric in the guise of (democratic) socialism, the issue at stake is only that of how to best serve and preserve capitalism, how to provide an infrastructure which will best serve the profit seekers and combat the inevitable negative effects of the capitalist process which, left to their own devices, unleash the most desperate levels of misery on the proletariat and the ensuing social breakdown which threatens the conditions for profiteering. In no way is the real antagonism addressed; the

wage labour and capital relationship which is the motor producing deprivation and privilege at its poles. The State may well appear to act on behalf of the deprived, mitigating the worst effects of unemployment with benefits, carer's allowances, disability payments and the like. Now and again this or that capitalist may fall foul of the Law and face sanction, but all of this only serves to maintain the basic framework of capitalist society. Give a little, take a lot, buy cheap, sell dear. Such is capitalism. However, even this limited attempt to dampen the class struggle through softening the worst excesses of the capitalist process comes up against the limits of the logic of profiteering, and as contemporary conditions demonstrate with ever more force, the contradictions of capitalism are beyond the power of the capitalist State to contain. Whether one considers the global proletariat or that of the metropolises only, the same process is unfolding, a war of attrition against our conditions of life, incremented exploitation, unemployment, pension cuts in a futile bid to maintain the profitability of capital.

In the face of this insoluble crisis the working class must take a sword to

the entire system, reject all the ideological traps and face the fact that it has no friends amongst the multifaceted political spectrum who are merely hydra's heads attached to a single capitalist body. It has to recognise the need to set up its own class dictatorship outside of the capitalist dictatorship posing as democracy, and it in that structure that our Revolutionary Party seeks to work, not in the rotten world of the capitalist political arena which, like all other aspects of capitalist society is a game played for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many, where sordid material interest are wrapped in a hypocritical veil of equality and fairness which can never be realised in capitalist society.

SS

Footnotes

1 *Reformism or Revolution* – Alan Woods. Yet the Trotskyist author of these accurate words belongs to the organisation quoted in the next footnote, the International Marxist Tendency, which encourages the working class to vote for the Labour Party and apply pressure upon it to realise policies in the interests of the working class.

2 <http://www.marxist.com/marxism-and-the-state-part-three.htm>

3 Financial Times 2009 No: 37, 012

4 See *The System is Bankrupt in Every Sense in Revolutionary Perspectives* 50

5 Marx — *The Civil War in France*

6 Engels Letter to J. Bloch

Announcements

The IBRP is proud to announce the opening (on June 10th 2009) of the Fondo Mauro Stefanini. This archive of the documents (some in English) of our comrade Mauro who was the main correspondent of both the PCInt and IBRP until his premature death in 2005 has been compiled by his widow and comrade, Franca Fortunato. It can be found at:

http://www.insmli.it/publicazioni/1/INSMLI_invito_it.pdf

Life of the Organisation

The Communist Workers' Organisation was founded in 1975 and joined with the Internationalist Communist Party (Italy) to form the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party in 1983. The Internationalist Communist Party was the only significant organisation to emerge in the Second World War (1943) condemning both sides as imperialist. It is the most significant organisation produced by the internationalist communist left which fought the degeneration of the Comintern in the 1920s as well as the process of "bolshévisation" (i.e. stalinism) imposed on the individual communist parties.

We are for the revolutionary party but we are not that Party. Nor are we the only basis for that party which will emerge from the workers' struggles of the future. Our aim is to be part of that process by participating in all the struggles of the class that we can with the aim of linking the immediate struggle of the class with its long term historic programme — communism.

Pamphlets

The Platform of the International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party
Revised English version (including postage in UK) 70p
 or see <http://www.ibrp.org/en/platform>

Socialism or Barbarism

An Introduction to the Politics of the CWO £3

South Africa: The Last Fifteen Years

How the end of apartheid would not benefit workers £4

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The full story of the only time the working class anywhere came to power.
New version £3

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With an introduction explaining the fight of the founders of the Communist Party of Italy against the manoeuvres of Stalinism and the confusions of Gramsci

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Trotsky, Trotskyism, Trotskyists

Examines the course of how Trotsky, who made such an enormous contribution to revolutionary practice, ended up giving his name to a movement which returned to the errors of Social Democracy

£3

or go to <http://www.ibrp.org/en/articles/2000-10-01/trotsky-and-trotskyism>

Meetings

For next meeting go to www.ibrp.org

The Basic Positions on which the International Bureau was founded are those established by the International Conferences which ended in the early 1980s. These are;

- * acceptance of the October Revolution as proletarian
- * recognition of the break with Social Democracy brought about by the First Two Congresses of the Third International
- * rejection without reservation of

state capitalism and self-management

- * recognition of the Socialist and Communist Parties as bourgeois
- * rejection of all policies which subjects the proletariat to the national bourgeoisie
- * an orientation towards the organisation of revolutionaries recognising Marxist doctrine and methodology as proletarian science
- * recognition of international meetings as part of the work of

The International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party

Britain

The Communist Workers' Organisation

which produces *Revolutionary Perspectives* (a quarterly magazine) and *Aurora* (an agitational paper)
 BM CWO, London WC1N 3XX

Italy

Il Partito Comunista Internazionale

which produces *Battaglia Comunista* (a monthly paper) and *Prometeo* (a quarterly theoretical journal)
 CP 1753, 20101, Milano, Italy

Canada/USA

Groupe Internationaliste Ouvrier / Internationalist Workers Group

which produces *Notes Internationalistes/ Internationalist Notes* (quarterly)
 R.S. C.P. 173, Succ.C, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H2L 4K1

PO Box 14173, Madison, WI 53708-0173, USA

Germany

Gruppe Internationaler Sozialistinnen

which produces *Socialismus oder Barbarei* (to appear quarterly)
 GIS, c/o Rotes Antiquariat, Rungestrasse 20, 10179 Berlin, Germany

France

Bilan&Perspectives

produces a quarterly journal of the same name
 BP 45, 13266, Marseille, Cedex 08, France

debate among revolutionary groups for co-ordination of their active political interventions towards the class in the class struggle, with the aim of actively contributing to the process leading to the International Party of the Proletariat, the indispensable political organ for the political guidance of the revolutionary class movement and the proletarian power itself.

Extract from the *Platform of the IBRP*

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9: Nation or Class; Hard Labour; Asian Tigers; ME War Process; October Revolution Today; Letters; Indian Workers Appeal

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